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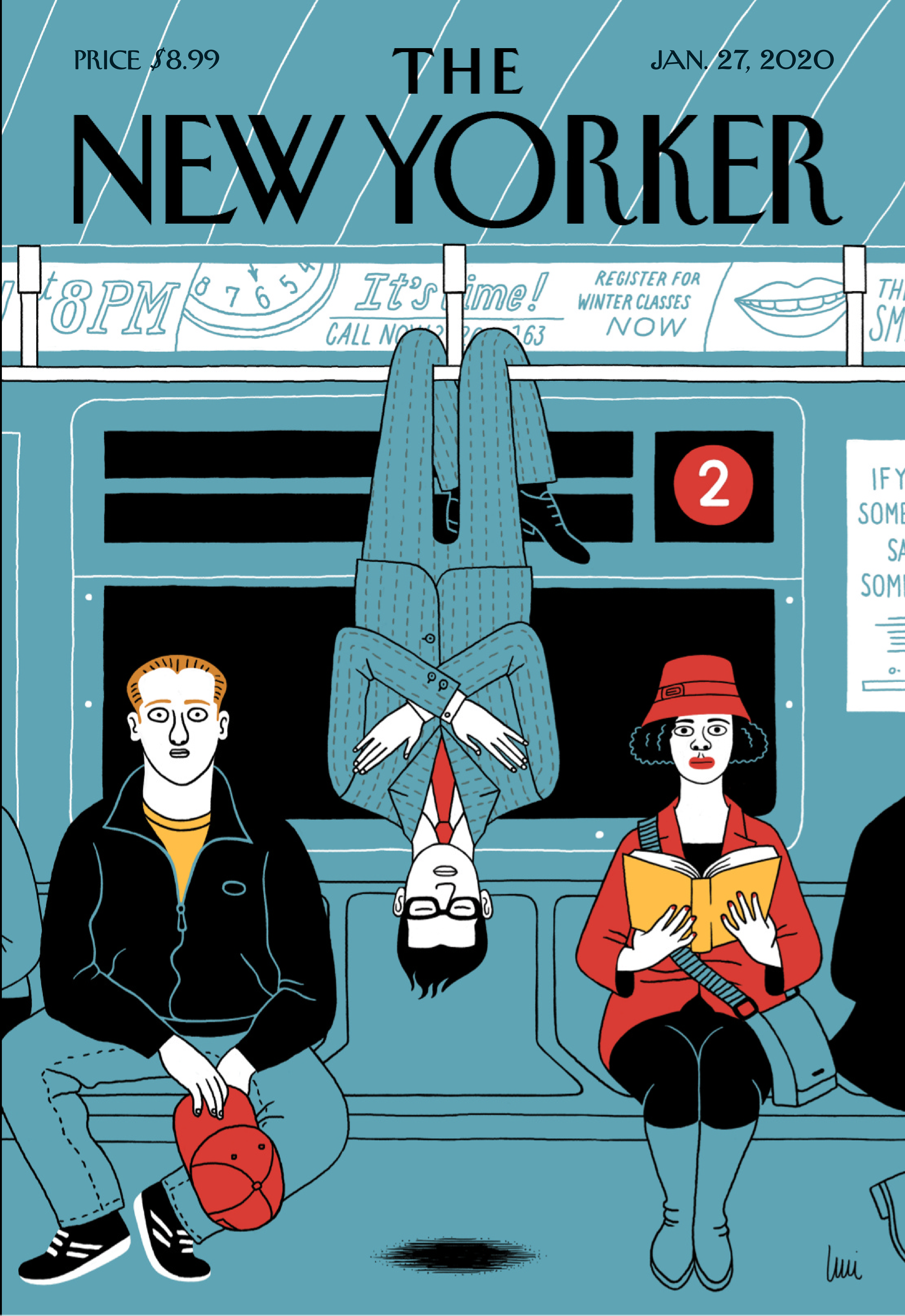
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NEW YORKER

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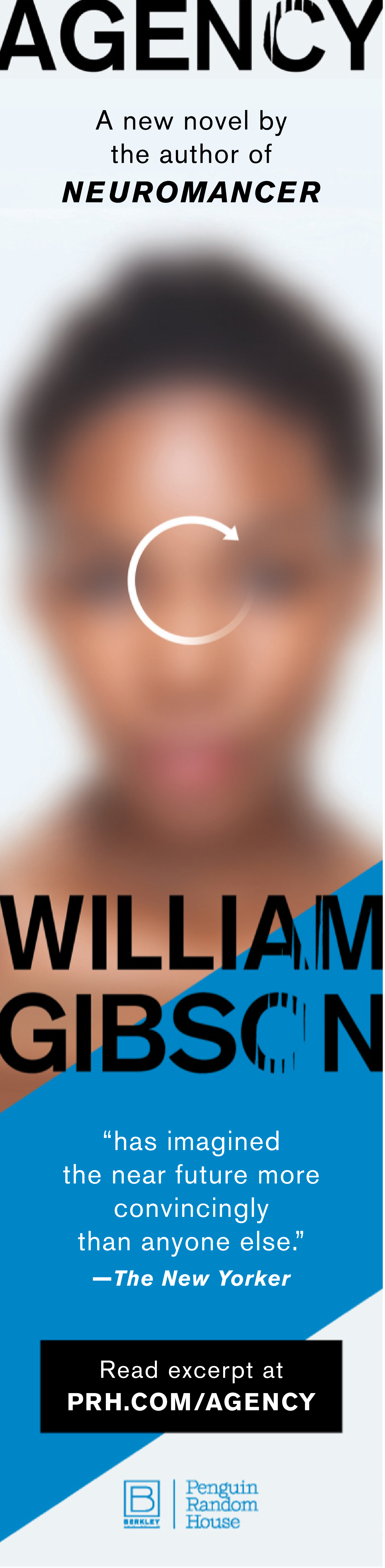

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Paul Rudnick (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 25*) is at work on the book for the upcoming Broadway musical adaptation of "The Devil Wears Prada."

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Anselm Berrigan (*Poem, p. 54*) has published several books of poetry, including "Something for Everybody" and "Come in Alone."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

VIDEO DEPT.
Go behind the scenes of the Iowa caucuses and the campaign trail with Eric Lach in a new video series.

NEWS DESK
Elizabeth Flock provides an update to her recent article on Brittany Smith's Stand Your Ground hearing.

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LEFT: SARA JOE WOLANSKY / GARETH SMIT; RIGHT: CRISTIANA COUCEIRO / PHOTOGRAPHS: NYDIA BLAS (WOMAN); GUY CALI / GETTY (COURTROOM)

THE MAIL

FOLLOW THE MONEY

As a person who had no wealth as a child but has been lucky enough to experience financial success later in life, I am proud of Abigail Disney and the Patriotic Millionaires for working to remedy the extreme imbalance of wealth and power in the United States ("Embarrassment of Riches," January 6th). Taking such a step requires courage, and I find it disturbing when Disney's efforts are met with scorn. She owes no debt except to her conscience, which, thankfully, is alive and well. Shaming the rich is not the answer—confronting the reality of economic inequality and becoming involved in making necessary changes to the system are what will save our country. Welcoming all citizens to participate in these efforts, especially those with the wealth and the power to make changes fastest, should be a priority.
Laura Stephan-Corio
Blairstown, N.J.

I was struck, reading Sheelah Kolhatkar's piece, when Alan Davis, a member of the Patriotic Millionaires, described the differences among being "affluent," "rich," and "mega rich." When very privileged people start discussing the nuances of what it means to be wealthy in the United States, you know we've reached the apex of income inequality. The Patriotic Millionaires might see my own income—taken together with my student-loan debt and my lack of family inheritance—as piddling, yet I live a comfortable life, owing to my citizenship status and my white privilege. Our perceptions about wealth and comfort in the U.S. cannot be considered separately from social factors such as these, which need to be confronted honestly as we try to address income inequality.
Emily Buckler
Ann Arbor, Mich.

WOMEN IN FILM

Anthony Lane, in his review of Greta Gerwig's "Little Women," rightly fawns over the film, noting its place in the tradition of Alcott-based screen adaptations (The Current Cinema, January 6th). But his estimation that Gerwig's movie "may just be the best film yet made by an American woman" strikes me as antithetical to the film's spirit of inclusivity. While I understand his implication that there are relatively few forerunners against which to compare it, the ranking of films directed by women seems in poor taste, especially when many of the year's most critically acclaimed and audacious films were made by women.
Ben Rendich
Pawling, N.Y.

CARTOONISH

Many thanks for giving cartoons their due in your Cartoon Takeover Issue (December 30th). While I now read most of the journalistic pieces in each issue, I was first motivated to subscribe to *The New Yorker*, as a teen-ager, in order to see the cartoons. You can tell how long ago this was by a tart comment that my grandmother made at the time: "Isn't eight dollars a year rather a lot for cartoons?"
Susan Payne
Cape Elizabeth, Maine

The Cartoon Issue was a huge hit with me and my fellow *New Yorker* readers. It arrived in time to damp down the noise coming from cable TV and iPhone videos during the holidays. The mix of old and new writings and drawings perfectly represented a rich vein of American humor, running all the way back to the nineteen-twenties. All in all, a delightful mini-anthology. Now back to, as Emma Allen writes in her Comment, "bummer facts about corruption and oppression and imminent eco-apocalypse." (We like to read those pieces, too).
Darrel O. Kirkland
Austin, Texas

•

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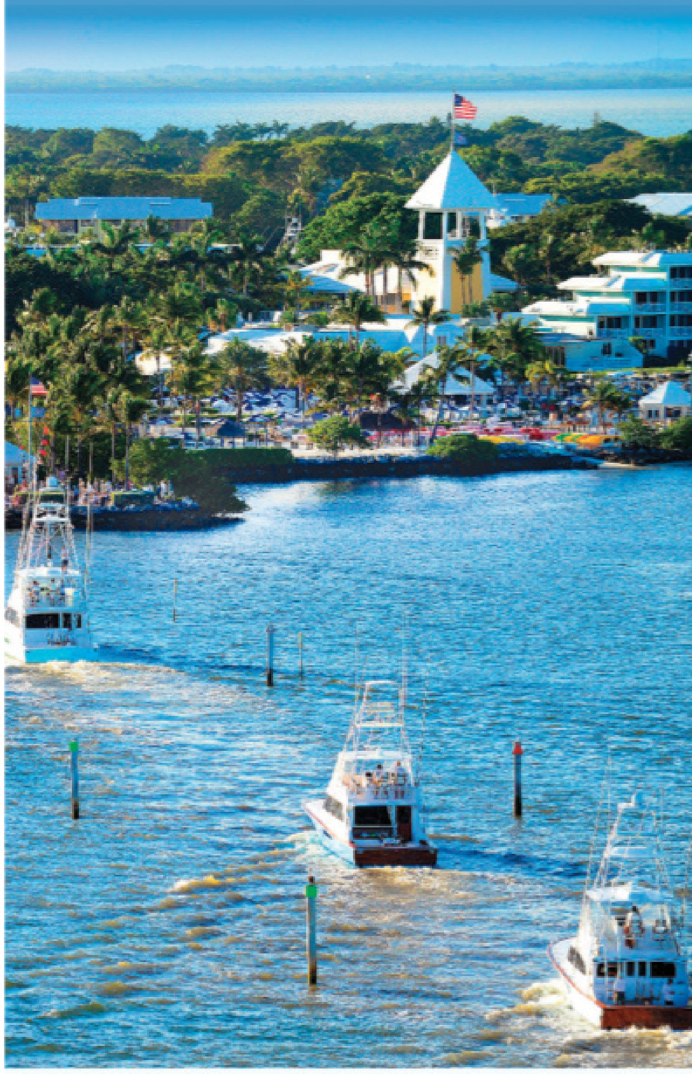

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Film Forum's **"Black Women: Trailblazing African American Performers & Images, 1920-2001"** (through Feb. 13) presents a wide range of movies that display the artistry of black actresses. The series offers films by black independent directors—such as Oscar Micheaux's "Within Our Gates," featuring Evelyn Preer, and Haile Gerima's "Bush Mama," starring Barbarao—and also films by white directors in the Hollywood studio system, such as Otto Preminger's musical "Carmen Jones," starring Dorothy Dandridge (above).

ART

"The Fullness of Color"
Guggenheim Museum

Color is an uncontainable force in this compact show of paintings from the nineteen-sixties (or thereabouts), mostly from the museum's collection, curated by Megan Fontanella. Morris Louis's deluge of poured pigment in the voluptuous, fanning stripes of "Saraband," from 1959, has Helen Frankenthaler to thank for its simultaneously translucent and velvety effects: in 1953, Louis visited Frankenthaler's studio, where his introduction to her "soak-stain" technique proved transformative. But some of the most striking works here were made with a brush. The Japanese artist Toshinobu Onosato's crimson "Painting A," from 1961-62, is not the monochrome that it may seem; its geometric gradation is formed by carefully rendered, pixel-like squares. In Alma Thomas's "Cherry Blossom Symphony," from 1972, a multicolored underlayer peeks through a rhythmic mesh of gestural pink strokes. Gene Davis, who, like Thomas, was among the color-field painters of Washington, D.C., executed his vibrant, pinstripe-precise lines freehand. Davis's eighteen-foot-long "Wheelbarrow," a sunset-hued painting from 1971, is a powerful example of the strain of geometric abstraction seen here, which the critic (and onetime Guggenheim curator) Lawrence Alloway described, in 1966, as combining an "economy of form and neatness of surface with fullness of color."—*Johanna Fateman (Through Aug. 2.)*

Katherine Bradford, Hulda Guzmán, Rebecca Ness
Berggruen

UPTOWN The second show at this new gallery, helmed by a third-generation art dealer, impresses with a trio of exciting painters. Guzmán, who is from the Dominican Republic, paints intricate vistas that nod to Mexican folk art. In "wednesday morning," an expanse of tropical foliage canopies a crisply detailed scene of tiny figures, some human and others mythic. Bradford renders everyday subjects (bathers sitting poolside, writers at their laptops) in semi-abstract, fuzzy-edged forms that are wonderfully nuanced. Ness, who, like Bradford, works in New York, is the pragmatist of the group, capturing the spirit of our time as she documents her home studio in still-lifes. "Frustration" depicts a messy worktable and the artist's hands, readying a paintbrush, below a folded copy of the *Times* with an impeachment headline.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 29.)*

Clarity Haynes
Denny Dimin

DOWNTOWN The eyes may be the windows to the soul, but torsos are even more telling in this mid-career New York artist's new group of intimate, numinous paintings. In this show, titled "Altar-ed Bodies," Haynes explores the possibilities of feminist figuration in cropped compositions whose subjects are frankly depicted, in frontal poses, with their scars, stretch marks, and sagging flesh. Their tattoos and jewelry assume a talismanic significance, which continues in a companion series—its genre might be called "queer trompe-l'oeil"—portraying collagelike shrines. In "Rainbow Altar (Spring Into Summer)," from 2019, colorful textiles, a photo of an ancient Medusa relief, and an image of a detail of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" join a goddess-shaped candle and a pink geode. Haynes deftly uses oil painting, a medium long associated with patriarchal religion and aristocratic portraiture, to represent a syncretic counter-spirituality, and the people who might practice it, in reverently unvarnished detail.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 25.)*

Richard Serra
Gagosian

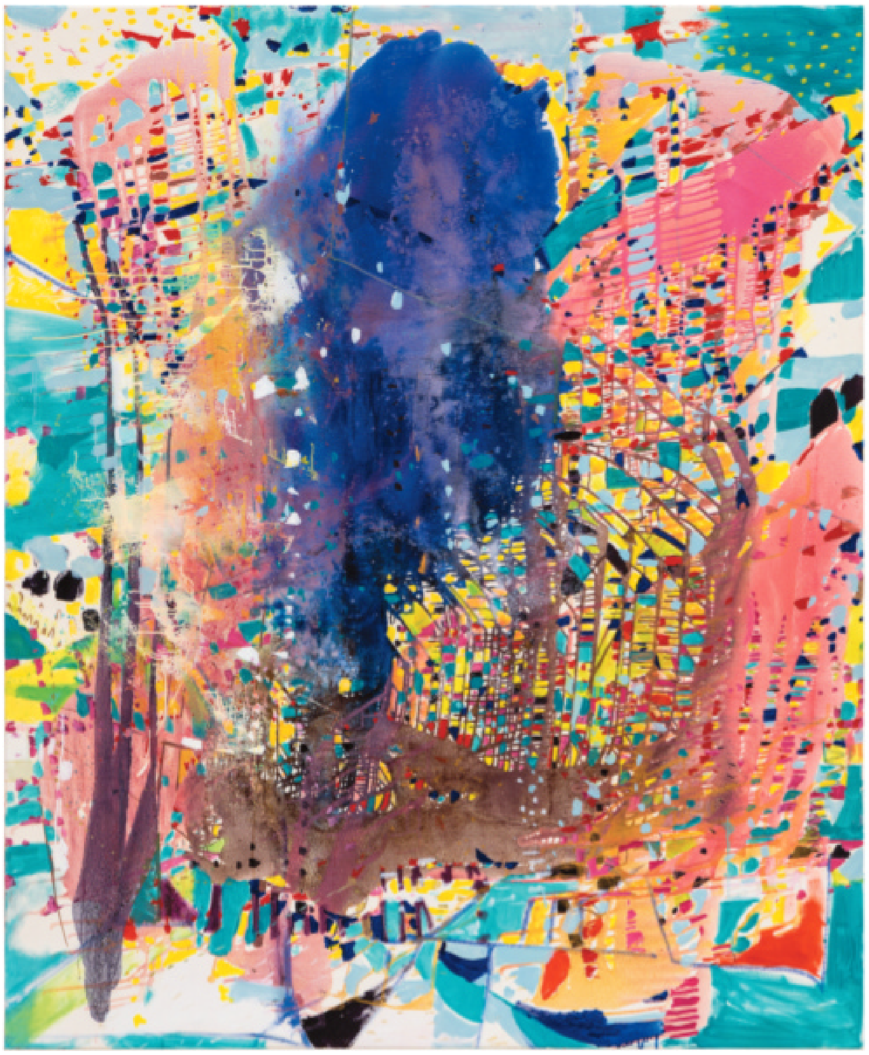
CHELSEA Great sculptors are rare and strange. In Western art, whole eras have gone by without one. Their effects partake in a variant of the sublime that I experience as, roughly, beauty combined with something unpleasant. Serra is our great sculptor, like it or not. I say relax and like it. In this show, a nearly hundred-foot-long elongated S shape of two-inch-thick weatherproof steel is sealed by a patina of softly textured rust. There's something profoundly satisfying—gravity as gravitas—about keeping company with it, as of being entrusted with a home truth of your and, for that matter, anything's earthly existence. The sensation might be a tuning fork to gauge the degree of fact in other aspects of a world awash in pixelated illusions. How real is real? How real are we?—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through Feb. 1.)*

THE THEATRE

BOOM
59E59

At a moment when "boomer" has become synonymous with anything insufferably

AT THE GALLERIES



A good abstract painting can seem inevitable—less made than materialized, like a Helen Frankenthaler stain or the squalls of Joan Mitchell. For thirty years, the American painter **Jackie Saccoccio** has been collaborating with chance on her compositions, pouring oil, scumbling dry pigment, dragging one canvas across another, and rattling, turning, and otherwise performing her surfaces until the results make the laws of gravity appear moot. In "Femme Brut," Saccoccio's new show in two parts (at Chart and at Van Doren Waxter, both opening on Jan. 22), the artist introduces an old-fashioned technique: drawing directly onto her paintings, with oil pastel, in furious cursive bursts. Several of these big, ambitious pieces, including "Le Puits Noir (Concave)" (above), allude to the landscapes of Gustave Courbet—a suggestion, perhaps, that the only distinction between realist and abstract is how an artist handles her paint.—*Andrea K. Scott*

OPPOSITE: ALAMY; RIGHT: COURTESY
THE ARTIST AND VAN DOREN WAXTER

clueless or overexposed, a one-man show that yet again recaps the years 1945 through 1969, with a hundred impressions and twenty-eight popular songs, seems at first disastrously unnecessary and ill timed. But Rick Miller (a Gen X-er himself, who wrote, directs, and stars) is a talented enough mimic, and his script is so briskly efficient, that it works. Miller's wry edge keeps the piece from descending too far into a nostalgia fest, and the archival clips (projected on a nifty cylindrical screen, designed by David Leclerc) that he weaves through the show often lend a fresh spin to painfully familiar events. His smartest move, though, is to tell the story through the lives of three characters whose perspectives all diverge from the era's overused white American narrative: his Canadian mother, his Austrian father, and his mother's African-American ex-boyfriend.—*Rollo Romig (Through Feb. 23.)*

Get on Your Knees

Lucille Lortel

Heterosexuality and its manifold indignities are the subjects of this charmingly raunchy and very funny standup set by the comedian Jacqueline Novak. Nowadays, nothing is less cool than to be a woman who "lusts after the common shaft," but such is Novak's predicament. She makes the best of it by bringing her "poetic eye" (why call it "doggy style" when you could speak of "the Hound's Way"?) and analytical swagger to sex—particularly the oral variety. Novak was twelve when she first learned that her "teeth were a danger to men"; pacing the stage in a pointedly schlumpy gray T-shirt and jeans, she goes deep on the semantics of the male member and the equally vulnerable male ego. Directed by John Early, the show is an overthinker's delight, and a reminder that a woman's humor can cut as deeply as her rage.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Through Feb. 16.)*

How to Load a Musket

59E59

For this structurally innovative Less Than Rent production, the playwright Talene Monahon wove a script out of interviews with self-dubbed "living historians" who re-create America's early wars, particularly the Civil War. On the field of mock battle, the biggest conflict is not between Yankees and Confederates but between "hardcores" and "farbies" (short for "far be it from authentic"); the former get by on hardtack and rancid bacon, while the latter smuggle anachronistic propane heaters into their tents. At these events, the moral, political, and economic issues that animated the real war—chief among them slavery—are usually left unexamined, mere footnotes to a family-friendly spectacle of reimagined carnage. But Monahon draws her interview subjects out beyond the obsessive pointillism of period costumes and replica munitions, and, with the director Jaki Bradley, presents a complex portrait of a darkly peculiar American pastime.—*David Kortava (Through Jan. 26.)*

London Assurance

Irish Repertory

The 1841 London première of this broad, literate farce was a great success for the twenty-year-old Irishman Dion Boucicault. Here, Charlotte Moore directs a spirited ten-person cast of exquisite comic skills, led by Colin McPhillamy as Sir Harcourt Courtly, a perfect, pompous ass, whose impending marriage to the young, beautiful Grace Harkaway (Caroline Strang) has far more in common with the transfer of property than with anything resembling romance. That angle is covered by Grace's attraction to Courtly's son, Charles (Ian Holcomb), and their smart interactions carry a whiff of the sparring between Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick. The action is loaded with mistaken identity, overheard plans, hiding behind curtains, and dozens of asides to the audience, which land, with odd sophistication, like the characters' interior monologues. The entangling of the plot proves to be more engaging than its unravelling, but the company brings it all to a funny, fizzy conclusion.—*Ken Marks (Through Feb. 9.)*

Maz and Bricks

59E59

Maz (Eva O'Connor, who also wrote the play) is on her way to a march supporting the repeal of Ireland's abortion ban; Bricks (Ciaran O'Brien) is the kind of guy who describes the demonstration as "feminazi." Whether you believe they can bond, and perhaps more, after a chance encounter on a tram will determine whether you buy O'Connor's "Maz and Bricks," in a production from the Dublin-based Fishamble company, directed by Jim Culleton. Maz and Bricks eventually confide past traumas to each other, and it becomes obvious that they were using biting sarcasm and cocky bro joviality, respectively, as defenses. Many romantic comedies feel preordained, no matter how seemingly ill matched their protagonists are, and it is to O'Connor's credit as a playwright that she adds a political edge to that deterministic narrative. Still, Bricks's evolution from a jerk yelling into a cell phone to a possibly sensitive soul strains credibility.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Feb. 2.)*

Queens Row

The Kitchen

No special effects, no zombies—it takes very little for the playwright Richard Maxwell

OFF BROADWAY

ILLUSTRATION BY CYNTHIA KITTLER

Back before camp was a theme for fashion galas and fodder for Ryan Murphy miniseries, it was an underground language for (mostly) gay men. The playwright, performer, and bon vivant Charles Busch has been one of its foremost interpreters since 1984, when his show "Vampire Lesbians of Sodom" became a downtown cult hit. He's since made a career of bawdy parodies, often of old movies and their grandly suffering divas, typically played by Busch in drag. In confections such as "Die, Mommie, Die!" and "Psycho Beach Party," he's turned Hollywood kitsch into clawed comedy, and he's not done. His latest is **"The Confession of Lily Dare"** (a Primary Stages production, in previews at the Cherry Lane), a sendup of weepy nineteen-thirties melodramas, starring Busch as a convent girl turned chanteuse turned queen of the brothels.—*Michael Schulman* to summon the end of the world. The vast space on the Kitchen's second floor is bare except for a small, low platform that looks as if it has been cut out from the floor. Three women—Nazira Hanna, Soraya Nabipour, and Antonia Summer, who also starred in the show's 2018 première, at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts—take turns standing on it, each delivering a monologue whose low-key intensity is, counterintuitively, accentuated by their unemotional delivery. The minimalist, cryptic production can feel hermetic, but Maxwell, who directs in his usual deceptively detached style, and the set and lighting designer Sascha van Riel create a quiet sense of dread that peaks in silent moments: a door letting in a sliver of light, a silhouette against a window.—*E.V. (Through Jan. 25.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet
David H. Koch

In the opening week of the winter season, the company goes back to basics with two alternating programs of ballets by its founding choreographer, George Balanchine. The first features four of his ballets set to music by Igor Stravinsky, from the strutting, high-spirited "Danses Concertantes" (originally from 1944, but rechoreographed in 1972) to the delicate and courtly "Monumentum pro Gesualdo" (1960). The second program offers more variety, and yet another ballet with music by Stravinsky: the 1949 piece "Firebird," with ravishing costumes by Marc Chagall. (Try to catch Teresa Reichlen in the title role.) It also includes the seldom seen "La Source," a pas de deux (plus corps) overflowing with refinement and charm, set to sunny music by Léo Delibes, the composer of such ballets as "Coppélia" and "Sylvia."—*Marina Harss (Through March 1.)*

Complexions
Joyce Theatre

A terrific fall season at the Joyce Theatre seemed to augur a new era, free from deadweight repeat offenders, and yet here comes Complexions Contemporary Ballet for another two weeks. This season's première, in the physically flexible, aesthetically rigid, vulgarly hyperactive company style, is "Love Rocks," set to a collection of Lenny Kravitz recordings as heavy on recent let-love-rule pronouncements as old hits. "Bach 25," from 2018, and last year's "Woke" fill out the programs.—*Brian Seibert (Jan. 21-26 and Jan. 28. Through Feb. 2.)*

David Neumann
Abrons Arts Center

In "Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed," David Neumann, a veteran white choreographer (responsible, most recently, for "Hadestown"), and Marcella Murray, a young black playwright, stage a conversation about race. The piece grew out of real-life talks initiated by Murray when she was a graduate student at Sarah Lawrence, where Neumann was teaching, and the resulting work reflects those personal origins. But it also folds in astrophysics, dance, and sly humor, and confronts the difficulty of such discussions by introducing more questions than answers.—*B.S. (Jan. 23-25.)*

Thunderbird Dancers
Theatre for the New City

For the forty-fifth time, the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers' annual dance concert and powwow will serve as a reunion for Native Americans and an education for everyone else. The program includes Marie Ponce's remarkable "Hoop Dance," along with dances called "Deer," "Shawl," "Stomp," "Jingle Dress," "Robin," "Smoke," and "Fancy." As always, the troupe's director, Louis Mofsie, a Brooklyn-born octogenarian who has been racking up lifetime-achievement awards of late, will do the introductions.—*B.S. (Jan. 24-26. Through Feb. 2.)*

CLASSICAL MUSIC

"Inflection" Series
92nd Street Y

The "Inflection" series typically highlights multidisciplinary collaborations, but this month it considers the working relationship between speech and song. The engaging baritone Roderick Williams and the sensitive pianist Julius Drake perform Brahms's song cycle "Die Schöne Magelone," with narration by Adam Gopnik to stitch together the medieval romance as the composer initially envisioned. On the following evening, Benjamin Bagby recites "Beowulf" in the epic's original Anglo-Saxon and accompanies himself on a six-stringed harp in a style that he reconstructed from other bardic traditions. The soprano Lucy Shelton's traversal of Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire"—a touchstone of modernist vocal writing for its use of Sprechstimme—helps bring the series to a close.—*Oussama Zahr (Jan. 22 at 7:30 and Jan. 23-24 at 8.)*

Scott Johnson
Roulette

Since Scott Johnson premièred "John Somebody," his breakthrough 1982 work, the composer and electric guitarist has forged an influential style that employs not only the instruments and voltage of American vernacular music but also the cadences and inflections of everyday speech via samples, fragments, and loops. Here, he joins the versatile ensemble Contemporaneous for the U.S. première of his 2003 piece "Americans," a meditation on nationalism and assimilation that Johnson created in the wake of 9/11, along with a new instrumental companion piece, "Assembly Required."—*Steve Smith (Jan. 23 at 8.)*

Object Collection
La Mama

Object Collection, the performance-art troupe organized by the writer and director Kara Feely and the composer Travis Just, takes its lead from such maverick creators as the composer Robert Ashley and the playwright Richard Foreman, then cranks up the absurdity with punk insouciance. "You Are Under Our Space Control," a new "utopian space-opera," synthesizes testimony from real-life astronomers and astronauts, material from John Cage and Sun Ra, and B-movie kitsch into a batty, freewheeling examination of mankind's next frontier.—*S.S. (Jan. 23-25 at 8 and Jan. 26 at 5.)*

Protestival
Spectrum

Using music's powers of persuasion to espouse some social or political cause likely dates back to antiquity, but what's especially appealing about Protestival, a cluster of five concerts and a lecture, is its open-minded purview. Offerings include a concert of new pieces commissioned by the trumpeter Kate Amrine, a screening of Sergei Eisenstein's silent film "Strike" with improvised accompaniment by the pianist Shoko Nagai and the guitarist Marco Cappelli, solo sets by the vocalizing cellist Meaghan Burke and the veteran singer-songwriter Tom Chapin, and a program of spirituals, hollers, and work songs reimagined by the guitarist John King and the keyboardist Mick Rossi.—*S.S. (Jan. 24 at 7 and 8:30, Jan. 25 at 7 and 8, and Jan. 26 at 3 and 5.)*

"La Damnation de Faust"
Metropolitan Opera House

Berlioz conceived "La Damnation de Faust," a work of swirling musical imagination, as a concert piece, and the Met, owing to unexpected technical difficulties in reviving Robert Lepage's imaginative 2008 production, presents it in its intended form. Even without Lepage's chimerical tableaux, the company has assembled a first-rate cast, including Elīna Garanča, Ildar Abdrazakov, and Bryan Hymel, who made a name for himself earlier in his career with Berlioz's grand "Les Troyens"; Edward Gardner conducts.—*O.Z. (Jan. 25 at 1.)*

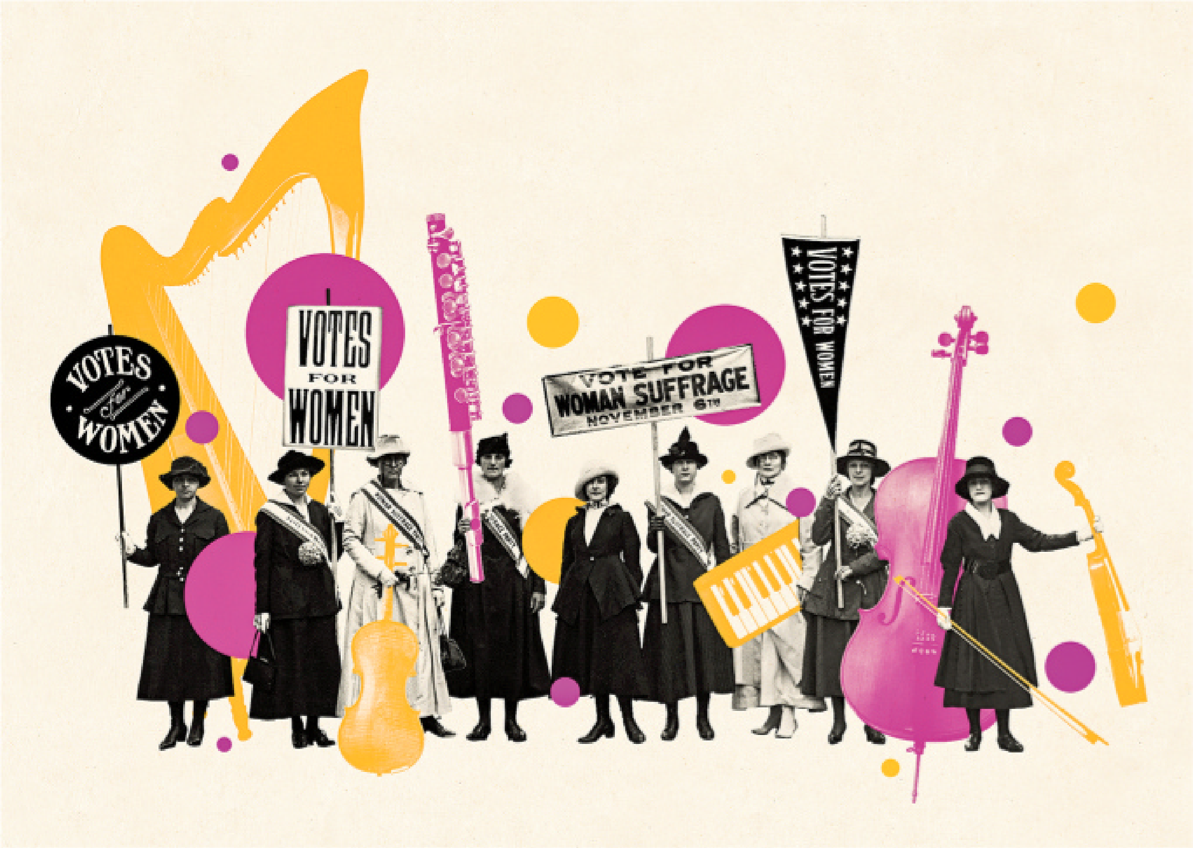
Kronos Quartet
Zankel Hall

The iconoclastic Kronos Quartet returns to New York with a temporary substitute cellist, Paul Wiancko, for a program that includes works by the three pillars of mainstream minimalism—Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass—plus a world première by Bryce Dessner. Also playing: Jörg Widmann, currently the composer-in-residence at Carnegie Hall, joins the International Contemporary Ensemble for a generous selection of his appealing works (Jan. 28 at 7:30).—*S.S. (Jan. 25 at 9.)*

"Das Barbecü"
Hill Country Barbecue Market

On Site Opera often takes a high-minded approach to choosing locations for its site-specific

NEW MUSIC



Focus, an annual festival of new-music concerts presented by Juilliard, has tended to concentrate on the musical life of a specific place, be it California (2009), Japan (2015), or China (2018). But last year's series offered a fresh spin—a showcase of music commissioned by international radio stations—and the latest similarly breaks new ground. "Trailblazers: Pioneering Women Composers of the 20th Century," running Jan. 24-31 at Juilliard's Peter Jay Sharp Theatre and Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, marks the centenary of women's suffrage in the U.S. with six free concerts. The programs are jointly curated by Joel Sachs, the festival's founder, and Odaline de la Martinez, a trailblazing conductor and composer in her own right. They include works by thirty-two women representing fifteen countries and encompass styles ranging from Florence Price's hearty Romanticism and Sofia Gubaidulina's ascetic piety to Betsy Jolas's elemental expressiveness.—*Steve Smith*

productions. Paisiello's "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" bowed at the Fabbri Mansion; selections from Gregg Kallor's "Frankenstein" haunted a catacomb in Brooklyn; Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" passed through a Chelsea soup kitchen. Now, though, the company stages Jim Luigs and Scott Warrender's "Das Barbecü"—a country-and-Western musical from the nineties that sends up the elaborate plot of Wagner's "Ring" cycle—at a cafeteria-style restaurant in the Flatiron district. Audience members can avail themselves of a barbecue dinner while five singers whirl through thirty different characters. Eric Einhorn and Katherine M. Carter direct, and Emily Senturia conducts.—*O.Z. (Jan. 26-28 at 7:30.)*

"Voices and Piano"

Austrian Cultural Forum

Since 1998, the Austrian composer Peter Ablinger has been hard at work on "Voices and Piano," a substantial cycle of brief, playful pieces in which a pianist plays melodies and rhythms that mimic and complement recorded speech from a pantheon of historic figures—among them Mao Zedong, Marcel Duchamp, Ezra Pound, and Nina Simone. Here, Ablinger and the pianist Eric Wubbels present selections from the collection, including the première of a new piece that incorporates the voice of the performance artist Diamanda Galás.—*S.S. (Jan. 28 at 7, free with reservation.)*

Bang on a Can

Merkin Hall

The entrepreneurial composer collective Bang on a Can initiated its annual People's Commissioning Fund Concert in 1997, introducing a crowdsourced model for funding new compositions that predated now ubiquitous Internet platforms like Kickstarter. This year's event, presented as part of the Ecstatic Music Festival, offers pieces by Hildur Guðnadóttir (who just won a Golden Globe for her "Joker" score), Amanda Berlind, Alvin Curran, and Qasim Naqvi.—*S.S. (Jan. 28 at 7:30.)*

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Indigo De Souza

Rough Trade NYC

Indigo De Souza's voice soars over acerbic, acid-washed guitars that, try as they might, never drown her out. Her lyrics are often wired, stream-of-consciousness confessions ("I want to say no when I'm offered a hit and it ruins my weekend") that whoosh out, sometimes sweetly and sometimes furiously, over punky, propulsive arrangements. Hearing the Asheville artist abandon herself and wail alongside her razor-sharp instrumentals has a raw and healing effect, like cauterizing a deep cut.—*Julyssa Lopez (Jan. 22.)*

Rufus Wainwright

Alice Tully Hall

Lincoln Center's annual "American Songbook" series crackles most when it pushes against the parameters suggested by its title to encompass an expansive view of American music. Appropriately, this year's edition opens with Rufus Wainwright, a proud habitant of bygone pop who was born into folk (via his parents, Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle) and has engaged with some daunting artistic entities: opera, Shakespeare, Judy Garland. For his series début, Wainwright presents a unique set that includes "songs that shaped [his] identity" and glimpses of his forthcoming album.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Jan. 22.)*

Larry Willis: "A Life in Jazz"

Dizzy's Club

The pianist Larry Willis, who died in September, may have never found his place on jazz's A-list, but he remained an invaluable resource to the musical community as an inspired sideman at the service of such disparate artists as Carla Bley and Roy Hargrove. Here, former associates—including Jeremy Pelt, Justin Robinson, and the fellow-pianist George Cables—honor the first-rate all-rounder.—*Steve Futterman (Jan. 22.)*

James Vincent McMorrow

Murmrr

The Irish singer James Vincent McMorrow has a falsetto that commands space; it's elegant, fragile, and flecked with soul, and he nimbly employs it across genres, from guitar-oriented folk to synthy eighties pop and glimmering electronica. McMorrow's voice grows through his four albums, pushing to the fore as he becomes more confident and free. For this engagement, rescheduled from December, he shares the new music

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTIANA COUCEIRO; PHOTOGRAPHS: BETTMAN / GETTY (WOMEN); BOB JACOBSON / GETTY; COMSTOCK / GETTY; CASPAR BENSON / GETTY; IMAGE SOURCE / GETTY; CHUANCHAI PUNDEJ / GETTY; TOM KELLEY ARCHIVE / GETTY (INSTRUMENTS); BETTMANN / GETTY; ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY; KEN FLOREY SUFFRAGE COLLECTION / GADO / GETTY (SIGNS)

he's been working on in a preëmptive effort to "forge that connection" between audience and song.—*Briana Younger (Jan. 23.)*

Remembering John Abercrombie
Birdland Theatre

The seventies were knee-deep in influential jazz guitarists; notable among them was John Abercrombie, who died in 2017. To celebrate what would have been the deeply thoughtful and ever-lyrical improviser's seventy-fifth birthday, a group of past collaborators, including Jack DeJohnette, Dave Liebman, and Mark Feldman as well as such musical beneficiaries as Ben Monder, Bob DeVos, and Rale Micic, assemble.—*S.F. (Jan. 23.)*

Josey Rebelle
Nowadays

Josey Rebelle is a rarity—a name d.j. whose rep comes not from producing (she doesn't) but strictly from her work on the decks. Her edition of BBC Radio 1's "Essential Mix," from last February, was voted the year's best, and it stands in for Rebelle's style in toto: rangy, droll, rhythmically varied without calling attention to itself, and raucous fun from end to end. Here, she plays open to close.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Jan. 24.)*

"God in Three Persons"
Museum of Modern Art

Like Kiss and Justin Bieber, the Residents are more recognizable for their image than for their sound. Such a position is strange for an experimental band, but then so is the Residents' look: most famously, oversized eyeball helmets paired with top hats and tailcoats. At MOMA, the largely anonymous collective adapts their lascivious 1988 album, "God in Three Persons," for a belated onstage première that includes videos by the media artist John Sanborn featuring the nonbinary adult-film actor Jiz Lee.—*J.R. (Jan. 24-25.)*

Regis
Basement

If machines could show their teeth, they'd sound a lot like the Birmingham, U.K., producer Regis. Beginning in the nineties, he helped forge a relentless, industrial-tinged techno style that still rings out in clubs around the globe. In December, his label, Downwards Records, reissued one of his earliest recordings, "Delivered Into the Hands of Indifference," from 1998; its latticework of percussion still sounds utterly modern.—*M.M. (Jan. 25.)*

Phora
Bowery Ballroom

Music and therapy are one and the same for the rapper Phora, whose songs—which often find him working through heartache and wrestling with demons—have earned him a legion of dedicated fans. With their support, the California rhymer decided to return to independence in an effort to maintain his artistic integrity; in a celebratory video posted to Instagram last June, he signed papers releasing him from his label. His first project since, "Bury Me with Dead Roses," from July, reflects the extremes of transition: the front half is tinted with euphoria, the back half with anguish.—*B.Y. (Jan. 28.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA RUPPRECHT

MOVIES

American Factory

In 2016, in Dayton, Ohio, where unemployment and despair were widespread after the closing of a G.M. plant, the Chinese automotive-glass company Fuyao opened a factory and hired thousands of local residents to work under hundreds of Chinese supervisors. For this documentary, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar had extraordinary access to the facility, its employees, and its managers. The filmmakers discover trouble of a typical corporate variety—management's opposition to unionization—and find that it's amplified by underlying political conflicts. The C.E.O., visiting from China, threatens to close the plant if it unionizes; the company propagandizes against the union drive and fires the organizing leaders. Workers contend that their safety and well-being are being disregarded; violations are discovered; supervisors complain that employees are insufficiently submissive. Senator Sherrod Brown, advocating for the union, outrages management; on a visit to China, the local "union" is shown to be run by the C.E.O.'s brother-in-law and linked with the government. The filmmakers' probing analysis reveals the basic principles of freedom and dignity within the political essence of labor issues.—*Richard Brody (Netflix.)*

I Wish I Knew

The furious ironies of the Chinese director Jia Zhangke's 2011 documentary, commissioned by the Shanghai World Expo, begin with its title—that of a song from a 1945 Hollywood movie, which plays at a senior citizens' dance in Shanghai where romantic reminiscences converge with memories of life before the Communist takeover. Jia gives voice to silenced states of mind; he visits Taiwan and Hong Kong to interview Nationalist partisans and veterans of the Chinese cinema, whose testimony recalls ideas and ways of life long banned in mainland China. His images of Shanghai's grandeur and squalor are anchored by the wanderings of the actress Zhao Tao, whose mysterious role connects with the anguished recollections of a woman whose mother, also an actress, was driven to suicide during the Cultural Revolution and whose sister's newborn child was forcibly taken from her. Zhao stands in for that child as an adult, searching in Shanghai for her birth family; there, she passes through the World Expo Park and beholds its pristine, soul-killing desolation. In Shanghainese and Mandarin.—*R.B. (Metrograph.)*

BRAZILIAN POP

The music of the São Paulo singer and guitarist **Sessa** is so stripped back that it feels like an act of undressing. His solo début, "Grandeza," from last June, opens with the placid lull of his vocals and a thrum of bucolic guitars that conjures such Brazilian traditions as Tropicália. But Sessa uses simplicity surreptitiously; his unvarnished minimalism slides into avant-garde territory, baring the depths of a refreshingly eccentric imagination. For his show at the Sultan Room, on Jan. 28, he's joined by the Queens-based vocalist and composer STEFA, whose beatific choral experiments also evince a keen understanding of how gentle intimacy can morph into stark exposure. Together, these musicians make a case for the sheer power of shaving sounds down to the bone.—*Julyssa Lopez*

Joker

A guided tour around the twisted world of Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix). He works as a standup comedian in Gotham City, despite not having a proper sense of humor. What he does have is an improper and involuntary laugh, apparently triggered by stress, although the exact nature of his mental-health problems is never made clear. What matters to the movie—directed by Todd Phillips and written by Phillips and Scott Silver—is the wild style of the violence that ensues. Arthur delights in aggression, giving rise to riots, and the film, hellbent on controversy, comes perilously close to sharing that delight. Phoenix certainly commands the stage, so much so that other performers, including Frances Conroy as Arthur's mother, Zazie Beetz as his neighbor, and even Robert De Niro as a talk-show host, are shunted into the shadows of the action.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/7/19.) (In wide release and streaming.)*

Little Women

Yet another adaptation of the classic novel, which seems to encourage a fresh approach from every generation. The latest version is directed by Greta Gerwig, and, like those who have attempted the task before her—George Cukor, Mervyn LeRoy, and Gillian Armstrong—she has assembled a potent cast. Saoirse Ronan, at her most strong-willed, plays Jo March, with Florence Pugh in equally striking form as Amy, Emma Watson as Meg, and Eliza Scanlen as Beth. Laura Dern is the girls' mother and Meryl Streep their stern but perspicacious aunt. Gerwig—who also wrote the screenplay—keeps looping back and forth in time, rarely slackening, and creates the impression of young souls ever ready for experience, whether joyous or forlorn; the result feels not loosely episodic but tightly bound, like the book on which Jo toils by candlelight. With Tracy Letts as her publisher and Timothée Chalamet as the doe-eyed object of almost everybody's affection.—*A.L. (1/6/20) (In wide release.)*

Marriage Story

Noah Baumbach's latest film stars Adam Driver as Charlie, a successful theatre director who lives in New York with his actress wife, Nicole (Scarlett Johansson), and their eight-year-old son, Henry (Azhy Robertson). Nicole and Henry go to Los Angeles, where she is appearing in a pilot for a TV show, and never really come back; the story is as much a battle of the cities as it is a clash of characters. Nicole, while staying with her mother (Julie Hagerty), files for divorce and hires Nora Fanshaw (Laura Dern) to fight her case. Charlie fights back with lawyers of his own, though it's a conflict that neither party wanted in the first place; as a vision of good souls enmeshed in legal machinery and debased by the whole experience, the movie—fervid and funny though it is—often sinks the heart. With Ray Liotta, Alan Alda, and Merritt Wever.—*A.L. (11/11/19) (In limited release and on Netflix.)*

Nationtime—Gary

When black politicians, activists, and artists gathered in Gary, Indiana, for the 1972 National Black Political Convention, the filmmaker William Greaves documented the event. The resulting film buzzes with the long-term historical power of the occasion, and notes the divisions that the organizers struggled to overcome. The gathering's many speakers—including Amiri Baraka, Coretta Scott King, Bobby Seale, Betty Shabazz, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Dick Gregory, and the city's mayor, Richard Hatcher—stir the delegates to acclamations of shared purpose. They offer challenges to Democrats and Republicans alike and, above all, seek to unify the group as an independent political force. Shifting attention between the leaders on the podium and the participants in their seats, and showing the corridors where activists work separately, Greaves contrasts the Convention's practical conflicts with the overwhelming energy that its leaders embody and unleash; the two elements are interwoven on the soundtrack, which features Sidney Poitier reading Greaves's analytical commentary and Harry Belafonte reciting poetry by Baraka and Langston Hughes.—*R.B. (MOMA, Jan. 22.)*

Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood

Sooner or later, Quentin Tarantino will work up the nerve to confront the present day, as he did in his earlier films. For now, however, he opts for yet another period piece—while, of course, reserving the imaginative right to adjust historical facts to his satisfaction. The year is 1969, and an actor named Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) is on the downslide. Once a star, he has been reduced to playing dastardly types on TV, and an agent (Al Pacino) proposes that he try Italian Westerns. Rick is good pals with his stunt double, Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt), and the movie is most rewarding when it's most relaxed—when the two of them just hang out. Rick's neighbor is Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie), and there's a lovely scene in which she goes to watch herself on the big screen, with Tarantino's cinephilia in full cry. Meanwhile, in the wings, the Manson clan awaits.—*A.L. (8/5/12) (In wide release and streaming.)*

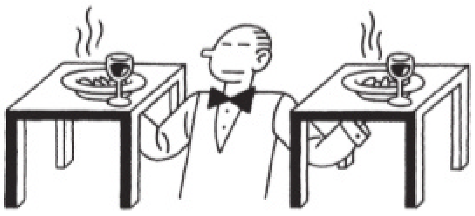
IN REVIVAL

COURTESY JANUS FILMS

Anna Karina, who died in December, at the age of seventy-nine, was the emblematic actress of the French New Wave, but, as seen in Film Forum's nine-film tribute to her (Jan. 22-30), her career had an international scope. The series includes the German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's coldly bilious melodrama **"Chinese Roulette"** (Jan. 26), from 1976, in which Karina plays a Parisian entrepreneur who accompanies her longtime lover, a married German businessman, to his rural estate—where they find his wife and his colleague together in bed. The entire scheme has been cooked up by the businessman's teen-age daughter (Andrea Schober), whose Machiavellian manipulations, including a challenge to an emotionally deadly game of truthtelling, turn the household into a derisive theatre of bourgeois cruelty. Karina—who also acted onstage, to great acclaim, in the nineteen-sixties—invests Fassbinder's archly composed theatrical tableaux, and his style of frozen gestures and studied inflections, with a vital, tremulous spontaneity.—*Richard Brody*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE TOMPKINS FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE



TABLES FOR TWO

Aquavit

65 E. 55th St.

Take care when eating the mini sausages at Aquavit, which are fermented for twenty-four hours, then cold-smoked, baked, seared to order, and served with a slightly fruity whole-grain mustard. Their tight, crisp skin, encasing a mixture of barley, spiced pork, and beef, is slick with delicious fat, and you might find, while reluctantly cutting the last of three in half—for equitable sharing with your dinner date, of course—that it slips from beneath your fork and bounces off your plate, as you both look on in abject horror.

Which is all to say: take care to eat the mini sausages at Aquavit. Last summer, the thirty-two-year-old Swedish restaurant closed for renovations; it reopened in October. The dining room has been outfitted with midnight-blue banquettes and blond hardwood floors. The wall dividing it from the kitchen is now made entirely of glass, with an automatic door for servers to glide through.

The prix-fixe dining-room menu includes a number of new dishes—from the same chef, Emma Bengtsson, who has run the kitchen since 2014—while retaining fan favorites. I was as pleased to try a marbled medallion of Mangalitsa pork collar, as tender and shaggy as corned beef and plated with a tart, crimson umeboshi-plum purée, as I was to revisit the Arctic Bird’s Nest dessert, a dramatic trompe-l’oeil featuring white-chocolate eggs with sea-buckthorn-curd yolks.

These updates make the restaurant feel subtly refreshed, which I imagine will go a long way for the types of diners who’ve been keeping the place afloat; on a blandly corporate block of Midtown East, Aquavit seems to attract mostly suits and well-to-do middle-aged tourists. The plush and quiet dining room is lovely, but conspicuously lacking in sex appeal. (On two recent visits, the soundtrack included Norah Jones’s 2002 album, “Come Away with Me.”)

Where things get more exciting, and where there is potential to attract fresh blood, is in the bar. The high-ceilinged, stripped-down corridor that was previously a zone for drinks and snacks is now essentially its own establishment (although it shares the dining room’s kitchen), with a full menu focussed on *husmanskost*, or Swedish home cooking.

Various iterations of the restaurant—which relocated in 2005 and has had many chefs over the years, most famously Marcus Samuelsson—have included a more casual café, and, before the renovation, the lunch menu offered *husmanskost*. But as dining habits at large seem to be trending away from formality and toward the celebration of unpretentious traditions, the bar menu feels newly relevant.

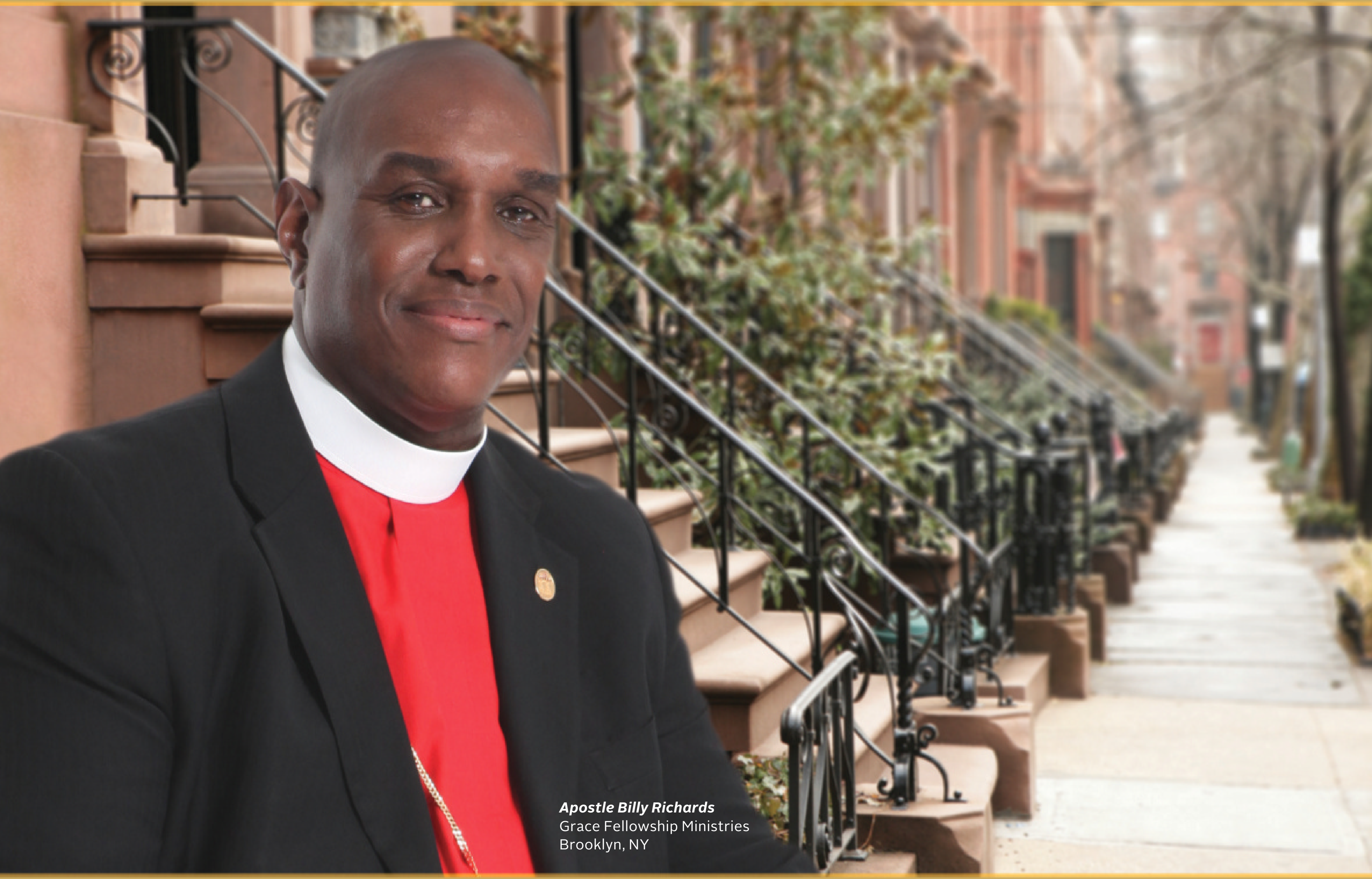
Here is where you’ll find those remarkable sausages, plus dill potato chips sliced so thin they’re as translucent as green stained glass, yet somehow sturdy enough to hold up to onion dip. Dense, pale-crusted sourdough bread is served with cultured butter that tastes alluringly briny, a detail I found befuddling until it hit me—sea salt! Recently harvested sea salt.

That the classics are fairly straightforward makes them no less spectacular. Pink folds of gravlax are showered in fresh-shaved horseradish. Swedish meatballs are nestled with quick-pickled cucumbers, lingonberries, and a luscious potato purée. A fat wedge of princess cake—whipped cream, raspberry jam, and vanilla sponge layered beneath a thick sheet of candy-green marzipan—looks exactly the way it does on “The Great British Baking Show.”

And then there are the surprises. Duxelles—a concentrated paste made of mushrooms, shallots, and thyme—sits with fluffy caramelized sour cream at the bottom of a shallow bowl, overlaid with julienned apple and crackly fried sourdough twists. Finished tableside with a frothy and fragrant broth, it redefines cream-of-mushroom soup. Among a handful of ice-cream flavors, the humblest-sounding steals the scene, malty, starchy, and just right: rice. *(Bar dishes, $6-$34. Dining-room prix fixe, $115-$225.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

“When I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, NYU Winthrop’s CyberKnife® was the answer to my prayers.”



Apostle Billy Richards
Grace Fellowship Ministries
Brooklyn, NY

Following a routine physical, Pastor Billy Richards of Grace Fellowship Ministries in Brooklyn was referred to a urologist for further testing where he learned the news that shocked him. He had prostate cancer. After much prayer and discussion with his family, Pastor Richards decided to hold off on treatment because he did not like the options he was given, especially surgery.

Then, he heard about CyberKnife® at NYU Winthrop Hospital. CyberKnife radiation therapy is as effective as surgery, but with no pain, no recovery period and less risk of side effects compared to other treatments. After five brief sessions, the treatment was a complete success. Today, Pastor Richards is convinced he has a second calling. “I’m a witness that CyberKnife works,” he says.

NYU Winthrop is the only CyberKnife Center in both Manhattan and Long Island. For more information about CyberKnife, call 1-866-WINTHROP or visit nyuwinthrop.org. **To hear Pastor Billy’s story, go to nyuwinthrop.org/pastorbilly.**

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THE NEW YORKER

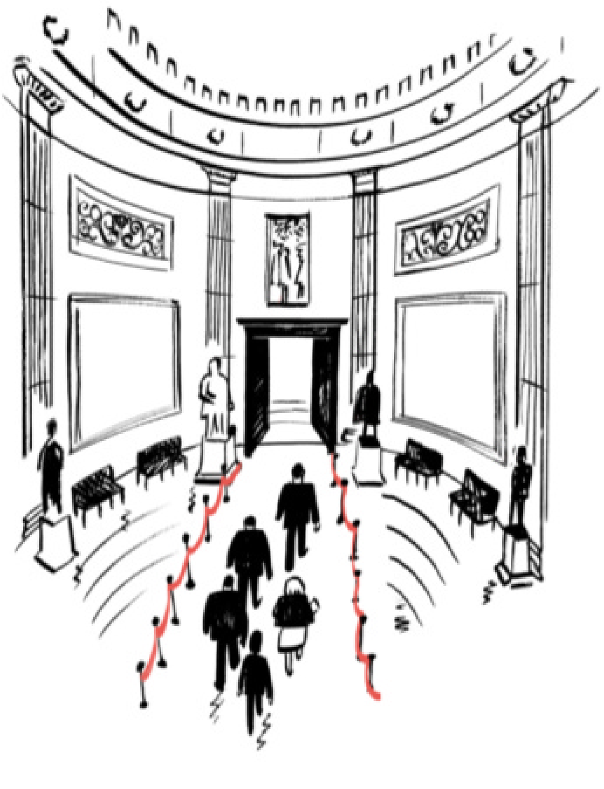
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
THE TRIAL

"This is a difficult time for our country," Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said last Wednesday, after the clerk of the House of Representatives arrived in the Senate chamber carrying articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump. McConnell added, "But this is precisely the kind of time for which the Framers created the Senate." That is true, even if his claim that the Senate would "rise above short-termism and factional fever" is risible. Some of McConnell's Republican colleagues don't seem to be thinking any longer-term than how many times Trump might tweet about them before their next primary. But this is the Senate we have at an extraordinarily wrenching juncture in our history, and on Thursday, following the direction of the Constitution, Chief Justice John Roberts swore in its members as jurors. The seven House managers whom Speaker Nancy Pelosi named last week are now basically petitioners, coming in to make their arguments before senators whose votes may be fixed by partisanship. And yet they have a strong case to present.

It could, no doubt, be stronger still. Just a few hours after McConnell spoke, Lev Parnas, an associate of Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, appeared on MSNBC in a doozy of an interview with Rachel Maddow. Parnas asserted that he had understood from Giuliani that they had Trump's approval to pressure officials in Ukraine to investigate Hunter Biden, former Vice-President Joe Biden's son, who had a paid seat on the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma. Parnas described a plot involving, among others, Attorney General William Barr. The House also released (and sent to the Senate) documents related to Parnas which sketch out various wild schemes, including possible threats against Marie Yovanovitch, the former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. Parnas has credibility problems; he is currently under indictment on campaign-finance charges, and his allegations need to be substantiated. Giuliani called him a liar, and Trump denied even knowing him, for whatever that's worth.

And more revelations are sure to follow. The essential dilemma, with Trump, is that there is always a new path leading to the disaster site of his Administration: a Parnas interview; a hint from John Bolton, the former national-security adviser, that, if the Senate subpoenas him, he will have interesting things to say; a decision from the Government Accountability Office that the Administration's withholding of aid to Ukraine, during its pressure campaign, broke a law called the Impoundment Control Act. That finding may upend the President's argument that there was nothing illegal about his dealings with Ukraine. The decision was made public just a few hours before the senators were sworn in; Senator Chuck Schumer cited it at a press conference during which he expressed dismay that the trial might proceed "without witnesses."



Calling new witnesses in the Senate trial would require a simple majority, in a vote that is expected after each side presents its arguments. That's less than the two-thirds required for conviction, but, given the Republicans' majority of fifty-three, it still may be out of reach. The House Democrats might have done better to extend their pursuit of witnesses when they had the ability to do so in their own right—that is, before they voted on the articles. They might have waited for some of the ongoing lawsuits concerning subpoenas to reach higher courts, in which case Chief Justice Roberts might be playing a more complicated role. But they didn't, and there is no going back. The impeachment is the House's expression of faith in its case, and it should not be forgotten that the managers already *have* powerful witnesses. More than a dozen testified in the House,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

defying the President's orders to stay away. Their damning accounts will be heard in the Senate and by the public, whether in video clips or in transcripts that the managers quote, and their words should resonate.

There is Ambassador William Taylor, who testified that the nation's official agenda had been subordinated to the President's personal one; Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, who heard Trump's July, 2019, phone call with President Volodymyr Zelensky and recognized it as highly improper; the former National Security Council official Fiona Hill, who witnessed Bolton's explosion about what he called a "drug deal"; and Ambassador Gordon Sondland, who interacted with enough senior Administration officials (including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice-President Mike Pence) to conclude that "everyone was in the loop." There is also David Holmes, the diplomat who heard Sondland reassure Trump that Zelensky "loves your ass" and would do anything he wanted. And there is Trump himself, who, according to the official notes of the July call, told Zelensky that he wanted him to "do us a favor." Indeed, the passage of time since the last witnesses testified may have obscured some of the richness of the record. (Who were the Three Amigos, again? Sondland, the former Energy Secretary Rick Perry, and the former special envoy Kurt Volker.)

Some Republican senators, such as Rand Paul and Ted Cruz, have argued that, if the House managers get to call more witnesses, the President should, too—among them, perhaps, Hunter Biden. On Thursday, Senator Kamala Harris told CNN, "We need to have all available evidence," but, when asked about the younger Biden, she noted that there are rules about relevancy. Otherwise, "you could just say, 'I want Santa Claus to come forward.'" Many Republicans, of course, regard Hunter Biden as highly relevant. There are no perfect answers here; a trial, in our confrontational system, is not meant to be precisely curated. The President, quite properly, should have the latitude to make the case that he deems strongest, just as he had the freedom, on Friday, to choose Alan Dershowitz—apparently taking a break from defending himself regarding his past association with Jeffrey Epstein—to help him make it.

The message that, without new witnesses, the trial may prove a sham also risks reinforcing the Senate Republicans' complaint that the House sent them something shoddy and incomplete, and that they can't be expected to do the lower chamber's work for it. But their work is there; much evidence is in hand. The Republicans' craven indifference to the Constitution will be all the more clear to the public if the emphasis is on what the managers do have, rather than on what they don't. And then the country can judge the Senate.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

L.A. POSTCARD
LAUGH MAN

The other day, after ninety minutes of solitary yoga on the floor of his home office, in Bel Air, Mark Sweet drove to Stage 20 on the Warner Bros. lot, in Burbank, to preside over the audience during a taping of the CBS sitcom "Mom." Sweet, a sixty-eight-year-old magician and hypnotist who used to work as a professional Willy Wonka impersonator, wore a gray sweater, black jeans, and Gucci loafers. He carried a small black bag of magic tricks, as he does most Tuesdays and Fridays, when he keeps studio audiences "warm"—primed to laugh loudly at scripted jokes—between takes and reshoots.

Sweet took a seat in the empty house to watch the dress rehearsal of the week's episode. "If you actually distill the comedy, it's about the laughs," he said. "I'm the front line of that." Each week's audience supplies the episode's recorded laughter. Sweet, the liminal space between the audience and the show, supervises this precarious choreography. The taped laughs are doctored only to edit out the occasional strange shriek or squeal.

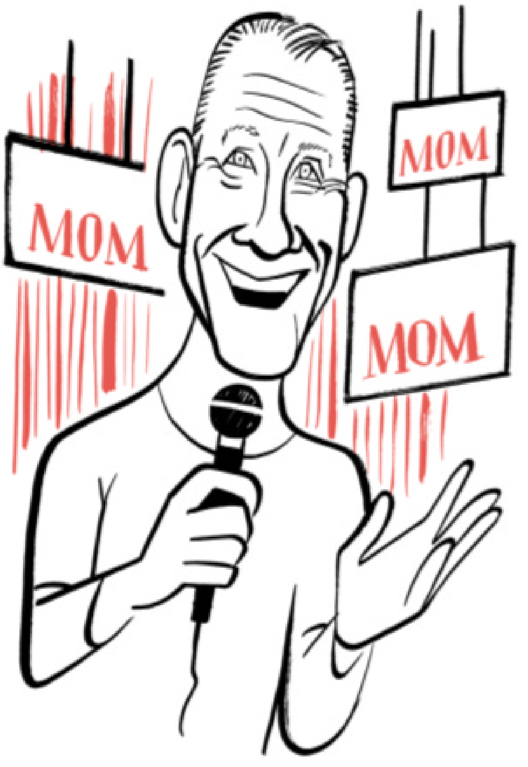
The twenty-two minutes that air on television are culled from many hours of stop-and-start taping in front of a group of restless human beings. Sweet is an emollient so crucial that he is known as the "king" of audience warmup. Garry Shandling used to arrange "The Larry Sanders Show" tapings around Sweet's schedule.

"With the audience, it's like bullfighting," Sweet said. "Either they have you, or you have them."

Outside, on the studio lot, a guy with a long gray ponytail and a red beret, who works for a company called Audiences Unlimited, wrangled a couple hundred unvetted audience members into a single-file line. They surrendered their cell phones, and, later, were handed slices of pizza in Styrofoam containers. When the company has trouble filling the seats, it pays organizations looking to fund-raise—senior centers, halfway houses, sororities, the Marines—to come pack the audience. Once inside, they become Sweet's responsibility.

When the run-through was finished, Sweet walked onto the stage, through the set for the house where Anna Faris's and Allison Janney's characters live. Conferring with the first and second assistant directors, he reviewed a forty-five-second laugh from the previous week, provoked by a character throwing salt over her shoulder into a baby's bassinet.

The audience traipsed in, and Sweet milled around, greeting people: "Are



Mark Sweet

you folks ready to laugh? Are you ready to be part of television history?”

Desiré Gonzales, a writer who attends the tapings every week with her mother, sat in the back row. “We want to see the shows, but we also want to learn the business, get familiar with the four-camera setup,” Gonzalez said. “You’ll see the writers huddling around the director, looking to see what works, thinking about reactions and changes.”

With everyone seated, Sweet opened a bag of fun-sized chocolate bars, which he keeps on hand to throw into the audience as a reward for clapping. “It’s a three-ring circus,” he said. “There’s the performance down there on the stage, with the actors. Then, there’s my little lab going on up here, with the magic. And then all the dynamics going on in the audience.”

While the cast set up for the first scene, Sweet performed a magic trick with a twenty-dollar bill, then started a break-dancing competition between a schoolteacher from Ohio and a teenager visiting from China.

“You have to be attuned to everyone—it’s very precise, like a ballet,” he said. “The live audience sets up the timing and the tone. We find laughs that aren’t even in the script.”

Sweet was in the middle of pretending to cut off a woman’s finger when the A.D. alerted him that they were ready to roll. “Sweetheart, have a seat,” Sweet told the woman. “And remember: it’s about *your* energy, about *your* laugh. Keep the laughter very strong, folks.”

For the next two hours, the writers and the producers reworked the episode in front of the twitchy onlookers. Sweet kept them distracted.

“If you lose the audience, you’re screwed,” Sophia Lear, a producer who worked with Sweet on “Living Biblically,” another CBS comedy, said. “You never get them back. A bad warmup is a blunt instrument—blasting hip-hop music, screaming things into a mike. It’s hell.”

The taping dragged into its third hour. “I’m using the power of waking suggestion”—a hypnosis term—“to get the audience to understand that they’re part of television history,” Sweet said later. “My entire energy is devoted to getting each of them to realize: we’re the other characters in this play.”

—Antonia Hitchens

THE BENCH
MEET THE LAWYERS

An invitation for a cocktail party honoring lawyers, especially highly skilled ones who are about to argue one of the most momentous cases of the year—the next Supreme Court abortion case—tends to read like a legal document. “Guests are invited to come and go as they please,” noted a message from the Center for Reproductive Rights, a legal-advocacy nonprofit. The party was held in the kitchen at the center’s offices, in a high-rise in the South Street Seaport. The two lead attorneys on June Medical Services, LLC v. Gee (not quite as catchy as Roe v. Wade) whom attendees had come to meet—Julie Rikelman and T. J. Tu—talked with guests while such phrases as “Bogus sham laws!” and “Second-class citizens!” ricochetted around the kitchen island.

The two lawyers have been working seventy-hour weeks on their case, which will come before the newly conservative Court in March. “My husband would say I do nothing else successfully in my life at the moment,” Tu, who wore square spectacles, said. He clerked for Sonia Sotomayor in the Second Circuit Court of Appeals and was a co-counsel on a 2014 Supreme Court case on false advertising. He said that he’d reviewed twenty-seven amicus briefs over Thanksgiving, while cooking dinner for thirteen people. Rikelman, who has shoulder-length brown hair and was dressed all in navy, has a ten-year-old and an eleven-year-old, who will turn twelve just before the abortion case begins. “So I’m going to have to figure out how to host a birthday party for her and then go to the Supreme Court,” she said.

The two discussed Supreme Court swag—Tu keeps the commemorative quill that he was given, after the 2014 case, in his medicine chest—and the SCOTUS fashion police. “We have to wear a blue or gray suit,” Rikelman said. “There’s an entire booklet about it. It gives you a lot of detailed instructions.” Even female attorneys who are just there to observe can wear pants only if they wear a matching jacket; furs and hats are forbidden.

The case, which contests a 2014 Louisiana law requiring abortion providers to have admitting privileges at a local hospital, resembles a 2016 Supreme Court case, Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt, concerning a nearly identical Texas law, which the Center for Reproductive Rights won, in a 5–3 decision. (Pro-choice advocates call these “TRAP” laws, for “targeted regulation of abortion providers,” because they are a roundabout way to chip away at abortion rights by throwing up logistical roadblocks.) The only difference this time is the composition of the Court. It will be the first abortion case since Brett Kavanaugh and Neil Gorsuch were appointed.

“It could be a turning point,” Nancy Northup, the center’s president and C.E.O., said, adding that, if the Court allows the law to go into effect, it would close all but one clinic in Louisiana and openly defy the ruling from three years ago. “They’re essentially saying, Roe is still in the books, but anything goes.” She paused. “It’s a lot of pressure.”

An hour into the party, only one bottle of wine was empty. A plate of cookies was untouched. “This is super tame,” Northup said. She insisted that the center’s parties are usually livelier: “Competitive in the courtroom translates to competitive on the karaoke stage, competitive at costuming, competitive at dancing.”

Across the room, two colleagues solemnly discussed the news. “The impeachment is really taking attention away,” Kelly Krause, the center’s press officer, said, adding that she’d had trouble getting reporters to focus on the case.

“If you take the word ‘abortion’ out of it, it’s a rule-of-law case that I think is very simple,” Jenny Ma, a senior staff attorney, said. They changed the subject to the center’s upcoming villain-themed office party.

“There’s an award for best hero-villain combination,” Krause said. “You could be R.B.G.” A guest suggested that Krause could be Kavanaugh. No one laughed.

“The state team is going as the characters on ‘Schitt’s Creek,’” Ma said. “They’re not paying attention to the theme.”

Past a treadmill desk and cubicles plastered with stickers that bore messages like “#NotNormal RESIST,” near the gender-neutral bathroom, was a printer with a photo of Justice Ginsburg taped on it. "All the office printers are named after badass women," Krause said. There is a Beyoncé printer, a Michelle Obama printer, and also a nonconformist Nemo printer.

By 7:30 P.M., two more bottles had been drunk. But this party was just a warmup. "We always do a rally on the Supreme Court steps," Tu said. "It's going to be thirty degrees." Inside, of course, he will have to wear blue or gray. "But once we're outside," he said, "I can put my pussy hat on."

—*Laura Lane*

MOONLIGHTING

SLEUTH

"Eighteen years ago, I was flying home to Alabama," the actress Octavia Spencer said recently, perched on the edge of a friend's couch in Los Angeles. Her voice was raspy, like a scratched record; her eyes roved around the room. On the plane, she recounted, she'd been seated next to John Douglas, the former F.B.I. behavioral scientist who specialized in serial killers. (He was the model for Clarice's boss in "The Silence of the Lambs.") Spencer had recognized him because she's obsessed with murder, psychopaths, and crime. "I had read 'Mindhunter,'" she said. "I kept looking at him, kept looking at him. Finally, the flight attendant said, 'Mr. Douglas, can I bring you some water?' I said, 'I knew it was you!' We talked the whole flight."

The house, decorated for Christmas, belonged to Nichelle Tramble Spellman, the showrunner of "Truth Be Told," a series that aired last month on Apple TV, starring Spencer as a crime reporter. The house smelled of vanilla and cloves—Spellman's sisters were coming over later to bake cookies—and under the tree was a huge box containing a new mixer from D. B. Weiss and David Benioff, the creators of "Game of Thrones." (With Weiss and Benioff, who are both white, Spellman and her husband, who are both African-American, created "Confederate," a show about an alternative outcome to the Civil War, which was scrapped amid protest in the Twitterverse.) The fireplace was flanked by black Santas and filled with black angels, which Spellman had ordered from Etsy.

Spencer was the first African-American actress to win an Academy Award—for her portrayal of a maid in "The Help"—and then be nominated for two more in back-to-back years. "I was being offered everything," she said, gingerly pouring cream into teacups of Earl Grey and passing them around. "I was, like, 'Listen, guys. What you don't know about me is that I am diehard "Columbo," "Murder, She Wrote," "Homicide: Life on the Street." '" Poppy Parnell, her character in "Truth Be Told," is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist who, fearing that her reporting helped send an innocent man to prison twenty years earlier, launches a podcast to reëxamine the case. Sarah Koenig, the star of the hit podcast "Serial," advised her on the role.

"It was definitely wish fulfillment," Spencer said. "It's what kept me reading as a child—mysteries, because I'm dyslexic. For me, it was always about engaging with a narrative. The ones that really grabbed me start with 'Jane is walking home alone, she walks into her house and hears a prowler'—*gasp*. What happened?"

Spellman, who has written two detective novels, mentioned "Nancy Drew."

"That's what I broke my teeth on," Spencer said. "I read every last one of them. I was reading 'Helter Skelter' at, I don't know, like, eleven?"

"I scared myself to *death* with that book," Spellman said. "My daddy kept saying, 'Put it down.' I was, like, 'I can't.' "

Octavia Spencer

"Do you think there was ever any gold in 'S-Town'?" Spencer asked, referring to the popular true-crime podcast. "I think there was." She paused to contemplate John B. McLemore, the Alabama horologist at the center of the story. "Ugh, I love that guy's voice. It sounds like Tate." Tate Taylor, a Mississippian who directed Spencer in "The Help," "Get on Up," and "Ma," was her roommate for seven years. They met on the set of "A Time to Kill," where she worked in extras casting. "We were three weeks into prep, and I was so bored," she said. "The weekend before we started shooting, Tate saunters in with his little wavy hair, looking like Zack from 'Saved by the Bell,' and I thought, I think I might stay! A lifelong friendship was born. He's very handy at decorating and very handy at fixing things."

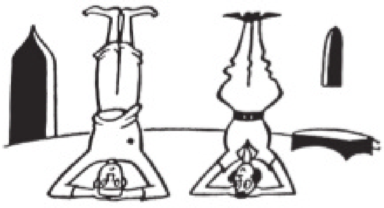
Spencer went on, "I do have that deductive-type reasoning. I can tell my girlfriends when someone's stepping out: 'Well, here's the situation. Do you want to know?' I'm usually that person who it's, like, Why are you always right? I'm, like, I'm not always right, I just see. The clues are there."

In the show, Spencer's character is affluent, childless, and professional—a far remove from the Jim Crow-era women she has often portrayed. (In the novel on which the series is based, Poppy is white.) "I am thrilled to Pete to not have to, in this case, worry about the color of my character," Spencer said. "I've always had to play black women. I know that sounds crazy. I *am* a black woman. Black men get to play characters that are just men. Very seldom do black and Latina women get to play just women."

Spencer topped off her tea and eyed the biscuits Spellman had laid out. The conversation turned to forensic matters—did you know that a missing hyoid bone is a sure sign of strangulation?—and kidnapped women. Playing Poppy, Spencer said, had inspired her to make her own podcast. "I want to talk true crime," she said. "It's really scary that I'm this encyclopedia of true crime. If it happened in the United States, if it's a serial-killer case, I know it." She smiled, gap-toothed, conspiratorial. "You know who else? Tilda Swinton! Tilda Swinton is the Octavia Spencer to the European-killer world."

—*Dana Goodyear*

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT.
BUZZED



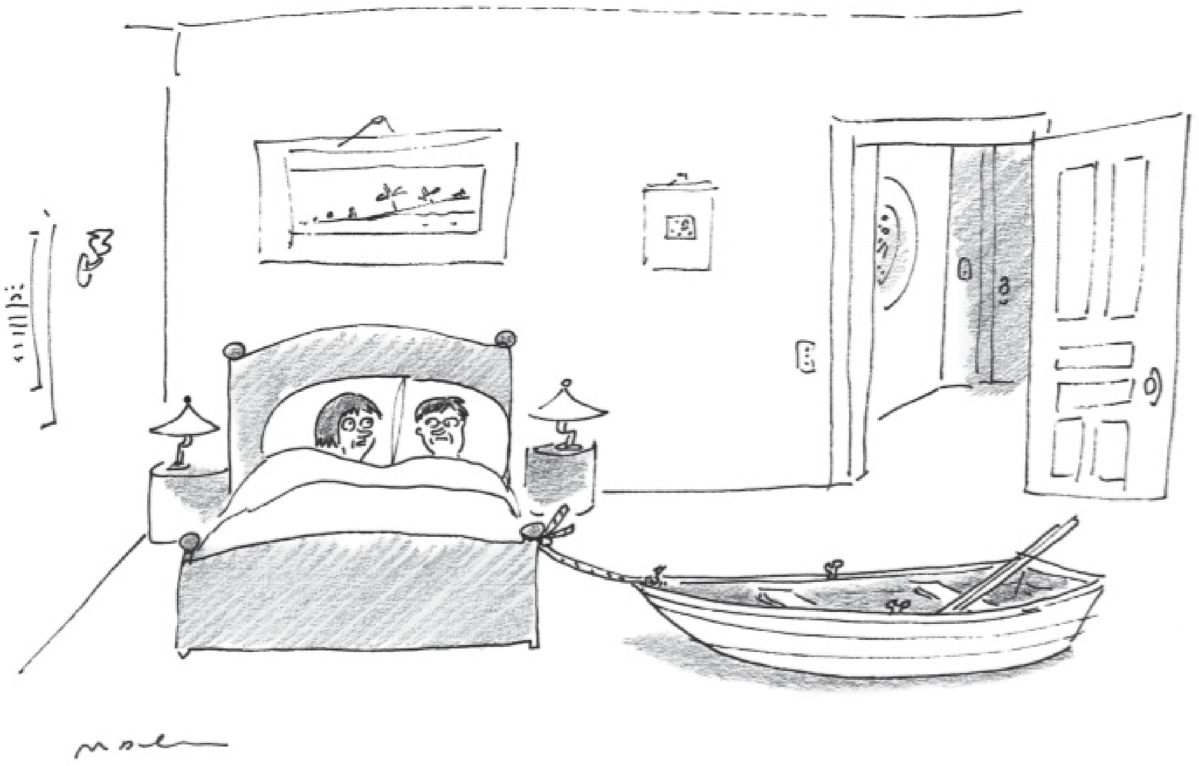
Billie Whitehouse, a thirty-two-year-old Australian fashion designer and tech entrepreneur, has spent years trying to figure out the best use for vibrating fabric. In 2013, she came up with vibrating underwear, for couples in long-distance relationships (she called it Fundawear). After that, she made a G.P.S. blazer, which vibrates to tell the wearer when to turn right or left (Navigate). Her latest invention is vibrating yoga pants, which buzz in contact with specific body parts as directed by a cell-phone app that calls out poses (Nadi X).

On a recent Friday morning, Whitehouse invited a handful of Instagram influencers—mostly women, mostly tall—to a loft in NoHo, to test-drive the pants. Mats were laid out beside a breakfast table topped with overnight oats and gluten-free banana bread.

Whitehouse began with a demonstration, assisted by a yoga teacher named Melini Jesudason. "I'm going to set the vibrational strength now," she said, handing Jesudason a black battery the size of a walnut and directing her to clip it into a little port behind the left knee of her black pants. The pants buzzed. Whitehouse, who has shaggy blond hair with dark roots and dark eyebrows, said, "The vibrations will guide your focus." The idea is that, when you perform an asana, five sensors in the pants scan your body, collecting data and calibrating your alignment. If it's off, the pants will vibrate and buzz in targeted spots, to indicate where to make an adjustment. After each pose, the app on your phone will say, "Congratulations," in a robotic female voice. Or it will say, "Please look back at the instructor and try again."

After a few poses, Whitehouse called her guests to breakfast. There was a pair of Nadi X pants, which cost two hundred and fifty dollars, at each place setting, along with a vial of CBD oil.

Folasade Adeoso, an influencer with eighty-six thousand followers, had outlined her eyes with gold liner. The vibrating pants, she said, were "very on brand for me." She'd already wriggled into hers and was doing some squats to test the fabric's elasticity. "They're cool," she said. "They kind of remind me of aliens, though." She pointed at the tiny wires threaded through the fabric.



"I guess you'll leave at high tide."

• •

Isabelle Chaput, half of a French performance-art duo who wear matching outfits, asked if the pants could be washed. Whitehouse nodded. "That was one interesting hell of a journey—the wash test, the tumble-dry test," she said.

Chaput nodded. "I think they make my butt look good, too," she said.

Whitehouse explained how, when she first arrived in America, she'd found yoga classes intimidating. "That's where Nadi came from," she said. To create the Bluetooth technology needed for the vibrating pants, Whitehouse hired a team of engineers. They spent two years collecting data from about a hundred yogis, on five continents, about the most common mistakes that people make while doing particular poses. Then they sewed sensors into the linings of some test pants and synched them to an app that they had created, using the data. The pants, which are manufactured in Sri Lanka, need to be charged between workouts.

Whitehouse told the group that she'd come up with some yoga sequences designed to be done while wearing the vibrating pants on an airplane. "Sitting is the new smoking," she said. "This is a genuine epidemic. It's not just because we're at desks all day but because we're constantly on airplanes!" (Because the app uses Bluetooth, it works with a phone on airplane mode.)

One woman asked, "Can you make sequences for music festivals?" Another wanted to know if they'd fit her boyfriend, who is six feet nine.

After breakfast, Whitehouse led a few more demos. "In Sanskrit, the *nadi* are the highways of communication that exist around the body when all your chakras are aligned," she explained. She double-tapped a battery and waited for it to light up. "These things are monogamous, I always say. They only like to be connected to one phone."

"We want to go into the market with a lot of consumer feedback," she went on. "The big vision is having a full highway of communication around the body. When you walk down the street, it's this bubble of data that can be delightful. And then we'll track it over time. We have cohort analysis, charting how well groups do in particular poses. We can individualize it." If Whitehouse's customers agree to share the data generated by their pants, she could become the Big Brother of the wellness set. "We just have to get them to approve it," she said. "Because of privacy laws."

—Jeanie Riess

PROFILES

DREAM WORLDS

N. K. Jemisin's inventive sci-fi defies convention and sells millions of books.

BY RAFFI KHATCHADOURIAN

Jemisin, who has a degree in psychology, is interested in systems of subjugation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROCHELLE BROCK

Several years ago, N. K. Jemisin, the fantasy and science-fiction author, had a dream that shook her. In her sleep, she found herself standing in a surreal tableau with a massif floating in the distance. "It was a chunk of rock shaped like a volcanic cone—a cone-shaped smoking mountain," she recalled. Standing before the formation was a black woman in her mid-forties, with dreadlocks, who appeared to be holding the volcano aloft with her mind. She was glaring down at Jemisin and radiating anger. Jemisin did not know how she had triggered the woman's fury, but she believed that, if she did not ameliorate it quickly, the woman would hurl the smoldering massif at her.

Jemisin awoke in a sweat and jotted down what she had seen. "I need to know how that person became who she is—a woman so angry that she was willing to move mountains," she told me. "She was angry in a slow burn, with the kind of anger that is righteous, enough to change a planet. That's a person who has been through so much shit that she has been pushed into becoming a leader. That's an M.L.K. I needed to build a world that would explain her."

Jemisin's writing process often begins with dreams: imagery vivid enough to hang on into wakefulness. She does not so much mine them for insight as treat them as portals to hidden worlds. Her tendency is to interrogate what she sees with if/then questions, until her field of vision widens enough for her to glimpse a landscape that can hold a narrative. The inspiration for her début novel, "The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms" (2010), was a dream vision of two gods. One had dark-as-night hair that contained a starry cosmos of infinite depth; the other, in a child's body, manipulated planets like toys. From these images, Jemisin spun out a four-hundred-page story about an empire that enslaves its deities. The book established her as a prominent new voice.

Jemisin is black, in her mid-forties, and wears her hair in dreadlocks. In her author photo, she gazes sternly at the camera, as if ready for literary combat. In person, she is much warmer, but she likes the picture. Typically, at the center of her fiction, there is a character with coiled strength. Jemisin, who has a degree in psychology, is interested in power and in systems of subjugation. In her books, the oppressed often possess an enormous capacity for agency—a supernatural ability, even, that their oppressors lack—but they exist in a society that has been engineered to hold them down. Eventually, the world is reordered, often with a cataclysm.

The notes that Jemisin jotted down after her dream went into a folder on her computer where she stores "snippets, ideas, random thoughts." Some are drawn from her reading of nonfiction: Jared Diamond's "Collapse," Charles Mann's "1491," Alan Weisman's "The World Without Us." Eventually, she told me, "this fragment pairs up with that fragment, and they form a Voltron, and become a story." (Voltron is an anime "super robot" that emerges when other machines combine—an artifact of eighties television that Jemisin enjoyed as a girl.)

Another file in the folder was from 2009, when Jemisin attended a NASA-funded workshop, called Launchpad, where participants discussed what Earth might be like if it lost its moon. Some speculated that our planet's axis would tilt wildly, triggering haphazard ice ages, and that its core might lose its stability, causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The fragments in Jemisin's folder began to pair up. She imagined a planet that had lost its moon and become seismically hyperactive. Such a place, she reasoned, could sustain life, but just barely; mass extinctions would be common. If the woman in her dream inhabited that planet, she wondered, then what would her civilization look like?

J. R. R. Tolkien once argued that the creation of an imaginary world was the highest form of artistic expression, but that it was also easily undervalued. If it is done well, much of the labor remains off the page. Before Tolkien wrote "The Lord of the Rings," he invented a mythology, a history, and even languages for Middle-earth; he explained to a friend, "I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit (generally with meticulous care for distances). The other way about lands one in confusions and impossibilities." It annoyed him that people "stupidly and even maliciously confound Fantasy with Dreaming, in which there is no Art." He wrote about elves. He wanted to be taken seriously, too.

Jemisin has no interest in pseudo-medieval Europe, but Tolkien would have recognized her rigor. To get a firsthand feel for volcanoes, she flew to Hawaii to smell sulfur and ash. To learn how people prepared for environmental stress, she researched end-of-days survivalists, though she stopped short of going into the wilderness to meet them. ("I wasn't stupid," she told me.)

As the idea of an ever-shattering planet developed in her imagination, Jemisin drew a map of a Pangaea-like supercontinent, which she wryly called the Stillness. She reasoned that its wealth would be concentrated in an urban center near the equator, at a geological spot that seemed stable, based on fault lines that she had sketched out. She decided arbitrarily that the woman in her dream lived in the volatile hinterlands—and then began to treat that decision like a discovered fact. "I'm, like, O.K., why isn't she working to stabilize this powerful, wealthy part of society?" Jemisin told me. "Well, she must have at one point been part of that life, but somehow got away." Gradually, the contours of a story emerged. "You let intuition do whatever it is going to do," she said. "I had a sentence in mind: 'Let's start with the end of the world.' That can mean the literal end of the world, it can mean the end of a civilization, or it can mean grief. That was the point where I decided that her son had died." The grief she understood. Jemisin's mother had become ill, and would not survive the decade.

After immersing herself in the Stillness for four years, Jemisin finished "The Fifth Season." The story defied easy literary categorization. It was sweeping but intimate, multilayered but simply told. It could be read as an environmental parable, or as a study of repression, or as a meditation on race, or as a mother's post-apocalyptic quest. Jemisin wove in magical elements, but she systematized them so thoroughly that they felt like scientific principles—laws of an alternative nature. She evoked advanced technology, but made it so esoteric that it seemed like magic. (Most of her imagined machines were made of crystal. At some point, the inhabitants of the Stillness eschewed metallurgy; the word "rust" even became an expletive.)

She took stylistic chances, too. "The Fifth Season" at first appears to weave together the stories of three people, but late in the book Jemisin reveals that she has merely shattered her protagonist's story into three narratives, a formal echo of her broken world. The protagonist is an "orogene"—a term that Jemisin derived from scientific nomenclature for a mountain-forming process—who can channel energies that quell or create earthquakes, with varying degrees of control. For the dominant civilization, which enslaves the orogenes—for use as weaponry or as geological instruments—they are a reviled but necessary underclass. The protagonist's primary narrative blisters with rage and trauma. Jemisin wrote it in the second person, the voice belonging to a narrator who is not revealed until a later book. "I tried her voice in different forms," she told me. "I couldn't get too close to her—she was angry with me in the dream, she's not going to talk to me. That doesn't make sense, I know."

In a different writer's hands, the use of the second person might have registered as a gimmick, but Jemisin made the device integral to the plot, and deployed it with personality—a voice with quirks and, occasionally, a sense of immediacy. ("Look, the ash clouds are spreading already.") "The Fifth Season" attracted wide acclaim for its inventiveness, world-building, and intricate assembly. In 2016, it won a Hugo Award for Best Novel—a first for a black writer. The following year, a sequel, "The Obelisk Gate," won again. In 2018, the final book in what became the "Broken Earth" trilogy, "The Stone Sky," won, too. No author in the history of the genre had achieved that recognition. The three books sold more than two million copies worldwide. The *Times* called them "extraordinary." John Scalzi, the former president of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America, heralded Jemisin as "arguably the most important speculative writer of her generation."

Jemisin lives in a duplex apartment in Brooklyn, with an office that looks out onto a garden, which she cares for meticulously. For years, she was an urban literary nomad, working wherever she could park herself with a laptop. "I don't go to coffee shops anymore," she told me in her office, late last year. "The best-seller life has made it possible to have this." She sat at a long desk against the wall; at one end was a cluster of awards. The room also contained a plush Darth Vader and a doll of Commander Uhura, from "Star Trek." Beside a chair was a chrome lamp resembling a flying saucer; Jemisin flipped a switch, and a band of tiny red lights on the saucer glowed. She had bought it on a trip upstate. "I saw that lamp, I *needed* that lamp," she said. "It's corny as hell, and it doesn't light up shit. It's just for the mood, but sometimes when I am writing I want to be in that mood and summon the energies."

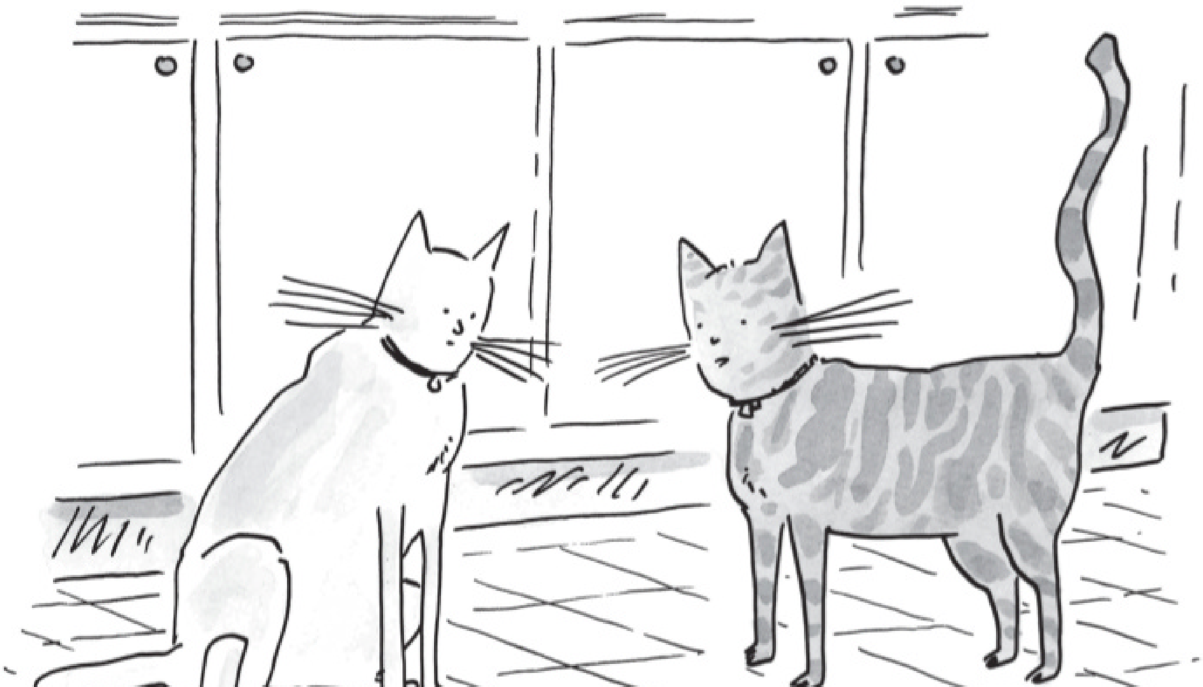
Jemisin immediately followed the "Broken Earth" trilogy with two other books. In 2018, she released "How Long 'til Black Future Month?," a collection of short stories. She also completed her next novel, "The City We Became," the first installment of another trilogy, which is due out this March. Submitting the novel to her editor, a few hours before midnight on New Year's Eve, she felt depleted; for more than a decade, she had been writing nearly a book a year. She resolved to take 2019 off, but she couldn't stay idle. She sketched out the new trilogy's second installment, while also navigating calls from Hollywood, speaking engagements, side gigs. Marvel Comics invited her to guest-write a series—an offer she declined, because she had already agreed with DC Comics to create a "Green Lantern" spinoff. As we sat in her office, the first issue of her comic was slated for release in a few weeks. “This is an unusual year for me,” she said. “Usually, I have only one thing to concentrate on.”

Above her desk she had hung family photos: glimpses of a truncated generational story. “Like most black Americans descended from slaves, it basically stops,” she told me. She once wrote about this loss—not merely the erasure of a backstory but also the absence of all that a person builds upon it; as she put it, the “strange emptiness to life without myths.” She had considered pursuing genealogy, “the search for the traces of myself in moldering old sale documents and scanned images on microfiche.” But ultimately she decided that she had no interest in what the records might say. “They’ll tell me where I came from, but not what I really want to know: where I’m going. To figure that out, I make shit up.”

Jemisin pointed to a photo of her father, Noah, as a young man—thin, confident, smiling—and spoke about his grandmother, a woman people called Muh Dear: “She basically made her living doing fortunes—magic, for lack of a better term.” In a story that Jemisin included in “How Long ’til Black Future Month?,” she envisioned Muh Dear as a shaman named Emmaline, facing down a malevolent fairy, the White Lady, who wants to take away her daughter. (“The White Lady was nearly all surface; that was the nature of her kind. That was how this meeting would go, then: an appearance of grace and gentility, covering the substance of battle.”) As the two spar, the White Lady draws Emmaline into a roiling dreamscape, in which it is possible to glimpse America’s future: the upheavals of the civil-rights movement; the progress and the tensions that followed. Amid the whorl of imagery, Emmaline offers to sacrifice herself in place of her child if her family is protected. The fairy accepts the gesture: “The White Lady closed the dream around Emmaline, and whisked her away.”

For Muh Dear’s real grandchildren, growing up in mid-century Alabama, there was no shortage of dangers. Jemisin’s father was born in Birmingham, where the commissioner of public safety allowed the Ku Klux Klan to attack the Freedom Riders when their Greyhound buses arrived, in 1961. As Jemisin once recalled, her father spent part of his youth “dodging dogs and fire hoses, turned on him and other Civil Rights protestors.”

Jemisin’s parents met as students at Alabama State University, and married shortly after graduating. Noah wanted to devote his life to painting, so he applied to a graduate program at the University of Iowa, and the two moved to Iowa City. Jemisin’s mother, Janice, pursued a degree in psychology, specializing in psychometrics; she later administered I.Q. tests.



“I’ll call my tech guy.”

When Jemisin was born, in Iowa, her parents named her Nora Keita. After her first birthday, the family moved to Brooklyn, where Noah strove to establish himself. For income, he taught art, and Janice taught grade-school science. (He now has a painting in the Met, an abstract called “Black Valhalla.”) “We were in a beautiful little brownstone,” Jemisin recalled. “We had the ground floor and the floor above. There was a gorgeous old mahogany bannister. There were grapevines in the back yard, and a squirrel named Greedy who would come seeking pecans that my grandmother would send me from her tree in Alabama.”

When Jemisin was five, her parents divorced, and her mother moved to Mobile. Jemisin went with her, and hated it: the regimentation of Southern society, the quasi-suburban alienation, the racism. While she was in the fourth grade, the Klan burned a cross on the Mobile courthouse lawn, then murdered a black teen-ager named Michael Donald as he walked home from the store. They hanged his body from a tree in a mixed-race neighborhood: a lynching, in the nineteen-eighties. “Not too far from my grandmother’s place, actually,” Jemisin told me. In a speech in 2013, she recalled its impact on her family: “I remember my grandmother sitting in her den with a shotgun across her knees while I cracked pecans at her feet. I was maybe nine years old, had no idea what was going on. She told me the gun was just an old replica—she’d brought it out to clean it. I said, ‘O.K., Grandma,’ and asked whether she’d make me a pie when I was done.”

Jemisin mastered an outsider’s art of adaptation. Shifting between Alabama and New York, where she spent summers with her father, she adjusted to the jarring differences across the Mason-Dixon Line, both social and personal—living in one home shaped by an artist and another by a standardized-test giver. Childhood, she told me, was “a schizoid experience.” In Mobile, she shifted across racial divisions, too, attending a predominantly white school that had been forced to desegregate. “I had to get up at o-dark-thirty to ride the bus for an hour,” she recalled. To exchange comic books with her white friends, she met them clandestinely behind a building.

Science fiction appealed to her at a young age. Little about her real life was cohesive, but imagined worlds could be complete, self-contained, and bound by logic. "I saw 'Star Wars' when it came out, because I was a creepy, obsessed space child," she told me. Later, she mined her local library for science-fiction novels; she covered the books in paper so that she could read them in class. Jemisin also began to write, constantly. Her cousin, W. Kamau Bell, who is now a comedian with a show on CNN, told me, "I wanted to be a comic-book artist, so we would spend our days in the front of my grandmother's house, laying in the sun, writing, drawing, and talking. We bonded over the fact that we felt like aliens in Mobile."

Jemisin's mother did not understand her daughter's interest in otherworldly fantasies, or her non-stop writing. But her father did. In Brooklyn, she stayed up late with him to watch "Star Trek" and "The Twilight Zone." Noah Jemisin encouraged his daughter to explore the city, and also to create. "Dad and I would pass time, whole afternoons, not speaking to each other," she told me. "He would be working on a painting in his studio. I would be sitting on the couch, writing." In the evenings, they went on walks. "He was my first real editor," she said. "One of my favorite memories is us walking across the Williamsburg Bridge. This was before it got renovated. It had fucking *holes* in it. You had to be careful or you would lose a foot! I would talk over story ideas and plotlines. He would listen to all of that."

One of her first childhood stories was a fable about a fantastical prehuman era in which animals built an advanced civilization, but then destroyed it—along with their ability to speak—in a war. She told me, "I actually published that, by putting two pieces of cardboard around it, wrapping them in paper, and binding it with yarn."

On its surface, all science fiction is about change—technological, scientific, social—that brings human beings into contact with the unknown or forces a reassessment of the familiar. Nonetheless, the genre remains inextricably tied to the everyday—the biases and limitations of the writer's time. Jules Verne may have imagined the Nautilus as a futuristic steampunk submarine, but his book expresses a nineteenth-century vision, in which the natural world existed to be dominated by men.

"How Long 'til Black Future Month?" takes its name from an essay that Jemisin wrote in 2013. It begins with two memories of watching "The Jetsons": first as a girl, excitedly taking it all in, and then as an adult. "I notice something: there's nobody even slightly brown in the Jetsons' world," she wrote. "This is supposed to be the real world's future, right? Albeit in silly, humorous form. Thing is, not-white people make up most of the world's population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show's creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo?"

"The Jetsons" was far from the worst example of racial exclusion. Until 2015, despite years of protest, the World Fantasy Award was a bust of H. P. Lovecraft, a white supremacist who believed that blacks were subhuman and who openly supported Hitler. Even Tolkien's masterwork, "The Lord of the Rings," was complicated by race. He had written his orcs to be revolting, devolved, violent agents of evil. In a letter, he explained his thinking: "They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types."

In Mobile's public library, Jemisin read voraciously, but she almost never encountered characters who credibly represented someone like her. Black writers have been engaged in speculative fiction since at least the nineteenth century, but when Jemisin first immersed herself in the genre their work was either difficult to locate or difficult to recognize. In early pulp science fiction, it was common for writers to sell their stories using pseudonyms, making their true identities almost impossible to discern. Those few novelists who were openly recognized as black—in the early eighties, there were only four of any prominence—were often encouraged to avoid race in their work.

In 1967, a few months after the notable African-American writer Samuel Delany won a Nebula Award, he wrote to *Analog* magazine, seeking to serialize a daring, experimental space opera he had written, called "Nova." *Analog* passed. As an editor explained, Delany's protagonist was half Senegalese, and white sci-fi readers would be unable to relate. "It was all handled as though I'd happened to have dressed my main character in a purple brocade dinner jacket," Delany later recalled, in an essay on racism in science fiction. To be a black author in the genre, he noted, meant navigating paradoxical demands: editors expected his work to carry no trace of his identity, but, no matter what he put on the page, they would inevitably view it as "African-American science fiction."

"Nova," later published as a book, proved to be highly influential—a progenitor of the cyberpunk movement. Delany recalled that he was frequently invited to speak on panels with Octavia Butler, the only other black author who had achieved his kind of visibility, even though their work was very different. She, too, had to navigate the paradox. "When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn't in any of this stuff I read," she told the *Times* before her death, in 2006. "I wrote myself in."

This simple goal was surprisingly hard to communicate. Just before winning a Nebula for her tenth novel, Butler sat for an interview with Charlie Rose, who asked, "Are you trying to create a new black mythology?"

"No," she said. "I am telling stories that interest me." She spoke a little about what that meant, but Rose persisted: "What, then, is central to what you want to say about race?"

She replied, with a dismissive sting, "Do I want to say something central about race aside from 'Hey, we're here'?" She recalled a panel she had been on, in 1979, with another writer. "He thought that it wasn't really necessary to have black characters in science fiction because you could always make any racial statement you needed to make by way of extraterrestrials," she told Rose. "If he was trying to start trouble he certainly succeeded." Butler later wrote a withering response to the writer's comment, in *Transmission* magazine: "Science fiction reaches into the future, the past, the human mind. It reaches out to other worlds and into other dimensions. Is it really so limited, then, that it cannot reach into the lives of ordinary everyday humans who happen not to be white?"

The essay was powerful, its impact negligible. My own copy of Butler's novel "Dawn"—a brilliant, eerie, thought-provoking book—is a paperback from 1988. The cover depicts a woman resembling Sigourney Weaver in "Alien," even though the text clearly (but lightly) indicates that the protagonist is not white. It contains no author photo, no bio. Jemisin's childhood encounter with "Dawn" was the same edition. Reading it, she had no idea that Butler was black.

Hudson Yards was crawling with superheroes and villains and oddballs: people dressed like Storm Troopers, like Batman, like Godzilla, like Care Bears. It was the weekend of New York Comic Con, the Mecca of nerd culture that, every year, seems to grow bigger, more commercial, more theatrical in its costume pageantry. One attendee wore a white dress supporting feathered Pegasus wings the size of a small hang glider.

I met Jemisin outside the Javits Center. She was wearing a leather jacket, a black blouse, and jeans, with her hair pulled back. She is often invited to speak about her books at Comic Con, but, as a novelist, she is generally spared the titanic promotional machinery that surrounds the main attractions: the stars hyping Hollywood films, the pavilions hyping triple-A video games, the m.c.s hyping comic-book celebrities. Jemisin, who describes herself as "a supercharged introvert," is just fine with that.

This year, though, there was no avoiding one of the largest hype machines. Her "Green Lantern" spinoff, "Far Sector," was scheduled for release just after the convention. "All right," she said. "I've got to get to the DC publicity area. Where the hell is that?" We passed through metal detectors and into a huge atrium. Surveying the hordes, she said, "I am imagining there is a black hole under Javits sucking all the energy out of the people here." To get through the day, she promised herself an evening of recovery: first relaxing with a Lush bath bomb, then slaughtering some digital foes in Mass Effect 3.

"Far Sector" is set at the edge of the known universe, in a multispecies city-state built on a Dyson sphere—a speculative megastructure, named after Freeman Dyson, who once postulated that hyper-advanced alien civilizations would seek to harness the energy of stars by encasing them in technological shells. The story centers on Sojourner Mullein, an N.Y.P.D. cop turned Lantern, who looks as if she has been cloned from the Afrofuturist pop star Janelle Monáe. Although it is a comic book, the writing carries Jemisin's wry tone, interest in power, and unapologetic use of allegory. The series opens with Mullein surveying a murder scene, while considering an aphorism from "Things Fall Apart," Chinua Achebe's novel of colonialism: "A man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself." It lingers in her mind, but Mullein dismisses it, noting, "I'm the one causing the trouble. Just by existing."

When Jemisin was in her twenties, she believed that a career in writing fantasy was closed to her, because of who she was. Instead, she pursued a graduate degree in psychology, and later took a job as a career counsellor at a college in Springfield, Massachusetts. "God help me," she told me. "Isolated. Also cold as fuck! Nobody told me that, like, lake-effect snows happen in western Massachusetts." To keep herself sane, she kept writing, often anonymous online fan fiction. (She still writes fan fiction, using secret identities that she guards aggressively.) A few years later, she landed a position at Northeastern University, in Boston, but felt no less lost there. In 2002, when she turned thirty, she had a moment of crisis. "I was, like, Oh, God, I am in debt up to my eyeballs, I hate this town, I don't like my boyfriend," she said. "I have got to reorder this. What do I need to do to be happy? O.K., get out of debt, get out of Boston, get into writing—maybe make some money from it, maybe that can help."

Jemisin considered applying to the Clarion writers' workshop, which specializes in science fiction and fantasy; luminaries in the genre teach there. But the workshop lasted six weeks—longer than she could take off from work. Instead, she attended a one-week workshop on Martha's Vineyard. One instructor urged her to write some short stories. Jemisin at first chafed at the idea, but then relented, recognizing that the form's constraints could sharpen her sense of pacing and character. She subscribed to genre magazines to study some examples, then tried her hand.

"How Long 'til Black Future Month?" includes one of her earliest published stories, "Cloud Dragon Skies" (2005), in which an ecological disaster has caused most of humanity to abandon Earth for a ring-shaped space colony, built from crushed asteroids, beyond Mars. "Old foolishness lay at the root of it," notes the narrator, a young woman named Nahautu, one of the few who stay. The planet has rebounded, except for the atmosphere. The toxic chemicals it has absorbed combine to form a new kind of life:

> One morning we awoke and the sky was a pale, blushing rose. We began to see intention in the slow, ceaseless movements of the clouds. Instead of floating, they swam spirals in the sky. They gathered in knots, trailing wisps like feet and tails. We felt them watching us.

In just a few pages, Jemisin sketched a scenario filled with ambiguities and philosophical questions. (How is nature defined? What represents progress?) The people on Earth decide to treat the animate clouds as natural—believing that, in a redemptive future, humanity must adapt to its ecosystem, not shape it. But scientists from the space colony try to neutralize the effect, and the sky reacts violently, tearing up the planet. Fleeing Earth in a coffinlike pod, Nahautu travels to the colony, an engineered world that is both better and lesser than the poisoned Earth. She is not fully at home in either place. In her new life, she becomes a storyteller.

DC Comics had a greenroom overlooking the Javits exhibition floor; after Jemisin spoke on a panel at the Comic Con main stage, a publicist ushered her there. Relaxed, she was in a

"These are payments for babysitters, but it's more exciting to pretend I'm a drug dealer."

joking mood. "My Twitter is full of bitch," she warned the publicist. Online, Jemisin is an active, quick-witted commentator, lacing her posts—about politics or about the writing life—with zingers and tart observations. In 2015, the *Times* invited her to write a column about science fiction, called "Otherworldly"; she did so for two years, proving to be a perceptive and at times unsparing critic. In 2017, she described Andy Weir's "The Martian," a surprise hit that inspired a blockbuster film, as "Robinson Crusoe in space," and his next novel, "Artemis," as "a 300-page film pitch that, like its predecessor, will probably be more appealing after it goes to Hollywood." That year, TNT announced that it was going to develop Jemisin's "The Fifth Season" into a series—an ambitious or perhaps foolhardy bid, given the book's narrative complexity and experimental style.

The DC publicist asked Jemisin, "Do you prefer to be called Nora or N.K.?" She laughed and said, "Nora is fine. Mom called me N.K. when I was in trouble as a child, so every time someone says it, I'm, like, 'What? I didn't do it!' "

Jemisin began to abbreviate her name at the start of her writing career, fearing that an association with sci-fi would interfere with her professional work. While she was at Northeastern, she imposed a strict deadline: to produce a novel within a year. Because she had a full-time job, most of the writing had to happen at night, but, she told me, "after work, my brain just couldn't make that shift." Mostly, she found herself mapping out ideas while doing the dishes or playing video games. She wrote every evening before bed, even if she knew most of it would not survive a self-edit the next day.

The novel that resulted was set in a kingdom inspired by ancient Egypt, with a belief system that drew on Eastern and Western religious ideas, as well as the Hippocratic notion of bodily humors. One of Jemisin's invented humors is a form of healing magic tied to dreams. A priestly caste, called Gatherers, harvests it from people whom a goddess judges to be corrupt; the extractive process is deadly, but the system keeps the society in balance. At the book's opening, a skilled Gatherer botches an extraction. In trying to figure out why, he learns that an assassin has been using the process to murder. "I was trying to appeal to traditional fantasy readers," Jemisin said. "It is a bog-standard fantasy quest story."

The book landed her an agent, Lucienne Diver, but no contract. Diver told me, "We got a lot of people saying, 'She's amazing, but I don't know how to fit her into the market.' " She thought that the setting, the story's complexity, the alchemy of Jemisin's various source materials—the very attributes that made her stand out—also made the book hard to position for a first-time author. Devi Pillai, then an editor at Orbit, told me that she had loved the book but thought that it had no clear sales hook. She told Diver, "If she has anything else, I want to be the first to see it."

Jemisin was convinced that the rejections, however politely stated, were code for the same editorial bigotry that Delany had faced in the sixties. (In 2012, after Jemisin had established herself, the book was published, as "The Killing Moon," and nominated for a Nebula.) "I came very close to quitting," she told me. "I had a long dark teatime of the soul, and basically somewhere in there I realized, People are just *that* racist. If the only problem is that the book is full of black people—O.K., I got you. I am going to write something full of white people, but it is going to be all about how evil those white people are. 'The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms' was that book. It was me getting mad at science-fiction publishing."

Whatever Jemisin's anger with the industry, she produced a shrewd, philosophically playful page-turner that both reflected and transcended her feelings. She decided to write it in the first person—unusual for epic fantasy, which often leans on the third person to accommodate expositional detours about the imagined world. The story was no less original: it was about a warrior baroness summoned to an insular palace balanced on a pedestal, like an Eero Saarinen tabletop. The baroness is drawn into court intrigues and must solve a family mystery; eventually, she upends the society's power structure, and along the way has interstellar sex with a god. (Jemisin told me that the book could have been marketed as a romance.)

Diver shopped the manuscript, and it inspired an immediate bidding war. Devi Pillai told me, "I was, like, 'Mine!'" By then, Jemisin was working unhappily at a for-profit college in New York. "I was at some stupid-assed retreat, and I kept ducking out to take calls from my agent," she told me. Pillai won the auction, with a six-figure bid that included a commitment for two more books. "I started screaming," Jemisin told me. "People at the retreat were, like, 'Should we call somebody?'"

For the first time, Jemisin could devote herself fully to writing. When Orbit began promoting the book—comparing it to the work of Neil Gaiman and George R. R. Martin—she created a Web site for herself. "Do big kids squee?" she wrote. " 'Cos I think a squee is appropriate right about now. I can't see how a little squee would hurt. Are we all agreed? 'Kay? Then here goes. ::SQUEE::"

In December, I caught up with Jemisin on the steps of City Hall, where she had come to research the second installment of her new trilogy. Rather than build a fantastical world for it, she decided to use New York, a city that has always seemed a little unreal. As she told me, "Sometimes, when I am walking, the air feels a particular way, or the light comes in at a particular angle, and the moment makes me feel like the city is alive and breathing."

For the new trilogy, she had chosen to make these feelings literal, positing that any city, upon reaching the necessary urban development, could achieve sentience. New York is about to transition when it is invaded by interdimensional aliens seeking to destroy it. The story is part "Ghostbusters," part "The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension." Jemisin told me that the project was a chance to relax, "an emotional palate cleanser," but it was also a coded critique of the sci-fi and fantasy genre. The aliens take on Lovecraftian form ("The tendril mass looms, ethereal and pale") and are fought off by a multi-ethnic, multi-gendered posse of underdogs—people Lovecraft would have hated.

More than a decade earlier, Octavia Butler had asserted, "Hey, we're here." But, Jemisin told me, "we have to *keep* saying it." Recent history, she said, had made this evident. In 2009, after a white novelist posted a formula for "writing the other," many people of color in the genre erupted in frustration, triggering a contentious series of online debates, known collectively as RaceFail, that unfolded for more than a year. At a conference, Nalo Hopkinson, a Jamaican-Canadian writer, delivered a speech titled "A Reluctant Ambassador from the Planet of Midnight," in which she tried to explain the explosion of anger to her white colleagues—making clear that Butler's sense of invisibility was still sorely felt. Jemisin told me, "One blog was, like, 'If you're a person of color who is into science fiction, speak up. We're doing a head count of how many of us exist.' And it was a huge number. I had thought we were unicorns. In fact, the post was titled 'The Wild Unicorn Herd Check-in.'"

Amid a reactionary backlash, Jemisin became a target. In 2013, she gave an impassioned speech about race in the genre, noting that a white supremacist had just run for president of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. Though he lost, he had secured ten per cent of the vote, prompting her to criticize the "great unmeasured mass of enablers" who had been silent. The former candidate, in turn, called her an "ignorant half-savage" in a racist screed. Jemisin told me, "That touched off a whole big foofaraw." Threats of violence poured in. She scrubbed her online presence and began to vary her commute.

Jemisin's successes were caught up in the foofaraw, too. As the cultural divide sharpened, two blocs of conservative writers began interfering with the Hugos, using a loophole to shape the list of nominees; until it was closed, two years later, people protested by selecting "No award" on ballots. "The Fifth Season" won its award just after the loophole was closed. Accepting her third Hugo, Jemisin stood at the lectern, with the rocket-shaped award beside her, and declared, "This is the year in which I get to smile at all of those naysayers, every single mediocre, insecure wannabe who fixes their mouth to suggest that I do not belong on this stage, that people like me could not possibly have earned such an honor, and that when *they* win it's 'meritocracy,' but when *we* win it's 'identity politics.'" Holding up the award, she added, "I get to smile at those people, and lift a massive, shining rocket-shaped finger in their direction."

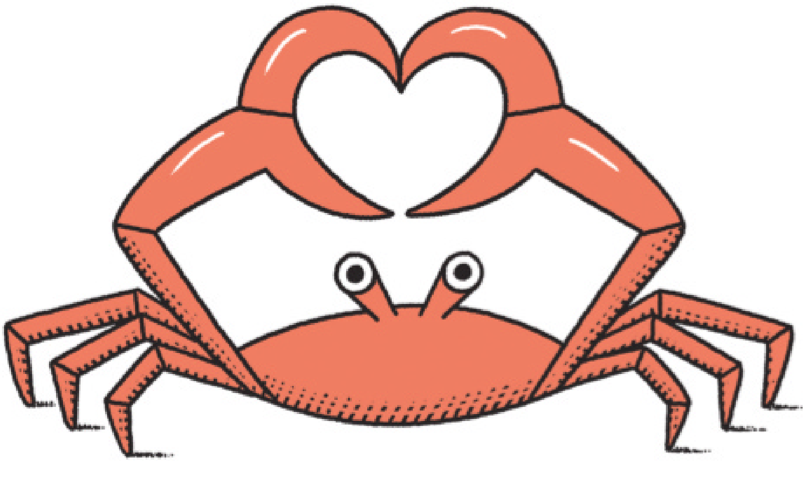
In Jemisin's forthcoming New York novel, "The City We Became," she borrows from some of her experiences: the aliens induce alt-right trolls to assist them, and the protagonists gird against cyber-harassment. "Places like New York are inherently free-form," Jemisin told me. "If a bunch of fascists try to take over, New York could die." She said that she was curious to explore "the ways in which the city, and the energy of a place like this, would resist that."

In the City Council chambers, where she hoped to place a scene in her next book, Jemisin sat in a balcony and observed the rituals and the moods of Gotham politics. There was a tribute to Pakistan's founding father, and a bill to force real-estate developers to set aside apartments for the homeless. She was especially keen on the way members conferred in side chats—a narrative opportunity. "I see that they are using a modified version of Robert's Rules of Order," she noted.

After three hours, her stamina waned. "This is putting me to sleep," she whispered, and we stepped out into the cold, under a darkening sky. The night before, a snow squall had enveloped the city and then quickly receded, as if on supernatural command. To the north was the Williamsburg Bridge, which in Jemisin's new book is destroyed by an alien creature, "like some haunting, bioluminescent deep-sea organism."

The promotional material for "The City We Became" describes it as her most accessible book. "What seems to be happening, and I don't know if I want to resist this, is an effort to push me into the mainstream," Jemisin said. "I am wrestling with, Do I want to let people call me the next Atwood, or whatever? They always want you to be the next such-and-such. But I am still going to write what I am going to write." Crossing Broadway, she mentioned an idea that was unrelentingly sci-fi: people who mutate into spacecraft. "Like werewolves, but spaceships," she said, giggling. "I know, it's corny. *I admit that it's corny!* But it is an idea that persists in my head, and I keep wanting to explore it." ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

CRABBY

BY PAUL RUDNICK

> Male field crickets perform mating songs and dances for each other. Female Japanese macaque monkeys pair off into temporary but exclusive sexual partnerships. Pairs of male box crabs occasionally indulge in days-long marathon sex sessions.
>
> —*The Times.*

As a male box crab, I'm very wary of being crab-shamed. So I've worded my online dating profile to read "Ryan, able to lie motionless for hours to avoid predators, but not you. Looking for stimulating conversation, snails to snack on (because they can't run away), and heavy non-stop male-on-male action after I've buried my female partner in the sand." But I'm not a sex crustacean—I'm just me. And if that means using my genetically enlarged right claw to attract other interested singles for a last-ditch attempt at romance in a tank at Red Lobster, so be it. And, yes, I'm comfortable using the term "ocean bottom."

Would I like to settle down, maybe in a high-end aquarium, or shellacked in a natural-history-museum diorama? Sure, but right now I'm young, and, when I get a late-night text from Liam or Cody or any of those crabs I partied with last summer in the silt near Provincetown, I'm there, especially if someone else brings the melted butter. Of course, I have other interests, including being a decorative accent on Hamptons coffee tables, scrolling through Instagram shots of wedding buffets to see if I went to school with any of the shrimp, and hoping that someday Netflix will become more genuinely diverse and create content about a queer crab who's just a crab and gets torn apart and devoured by a well-fed Midwestern tourist wearing a plastic bib, just like anyone else.

Some folks say that, because social groups of macaque monkeys are matriarchal, the macaques are more mature and relationship-oriented. For example, my friend Olivia is a macaque who's working on a memoir about picking lice out of the fur on her mom's head. Olivia met Taryn, another macaque, at a screech-and-skim book club, where they were pawing through the latest Cubist-structured novel about a baboon trying to find meaning as a product manager at Google. Olivia and Taryn started seeing each other, met the other fifty-eight macaques in their habitats, binge-watched a BBC series featuring a female macaque as a weary Welsh detective, and found a fabulous tree to share near a game preserve and a vegan café, all in the span of eighteen hours.

I loved watching Olivia and Taryn blossom into a caring, supportive, and fun-positive couple as their tree became a magnet for macaques like Ember, who's directing a documentary for Animal Planet about a macaque startup that sells propeller beanies made from hemp. They also mentored Delia, who's choreographing an awesome dance-theatre piece about chimps reclaiming roller-skating in satin bloomers as a dignified form of self-expression.

Sadly, Olivia and Taryn broke up a few days later, and they no longer bare their teeth at each other or share papayas, because, as Olivia confided, "it still hurts too much." Taryn's healing process includes ripping the pages out of a bound journal with her feet and eating them. And I'd just like to go on record saying that Olivia and Taryn's coupling was completely monogamous, no matter what you've heard from Persimmon, that macaque who thinks she's so evolved because she got a MacArthur after publishing a poetry collection about redefining butchness, called "Monkeywrench," and being named by *National Geographic* as one of the Ten Macaques Under Thirty to Watch Through Binoculars.

Of course, everyone has an opinion about male field crickets: Are their mating songs and dances just annoying all-night raves, designed to make older crickets move indoors, "away from that racket"? Or are today's crickets an entirely new species that subverts gender and body-image issues by making a noise that sounds like Ariana Grande duetting on a Christmas hit with a Dyson cordless vacuum cleaner? I believe that TikTok is the ideal app for crickets, since they have an average life span of just one week. As my cricket friend Arlen likes to say, "Sing, dance, and leave behind something that makes human beings scream when they step on it because it crunches."

Arlen's an actor, and he'll soon be starring in an unauthorized bio-pic about Jiminy Cricket called "Behind the Spats." He is also releasing a fifteen-hour album of his own music, which he says is aimed at "crickets, locusts, praying mantises, and anyone who's been called a Biblical plague." I've watched field-cricket-mating videos, which are like a cross between something you'd find stuck in a screen door after a tornado and a really great episode of "Glee."

I guess that, when it comes to L.G.B.T.Q. animals, we all live our own best lives and gnaw on our own bits of leather, wood, or rubber. But at least we're not mindless sheep—unless, of course, we are mindless sheep, who are great. ♦

ANNALS OF ENTERPRISE

BIG SPENDERS

Venture capital shaped the past decade. Will it destroy the next?

BY NATHAN HELLER

For a certain sort of nineteenth-century person—the sort with high risk tolerance and little revulsion to brutality—a natural career lay in whaling. The odds of success here were, by almost every measure, poor. An expedition first needed to find whales in the vastness of the oceans. If it succeeded, it had to approach the whales in silence, with a small craft; strike with a harpoon; stay afloat, intact, engaged, and oriented as the poor creatures thrashed about, sometimes for miles through iceberg-laden water; row back to the main ship with the carcasses; harvest the baleen and render the oil; and survive the journey home. “On the eve of a Nantucket voyage, I regarded those marble tablets, and by the murky light of that darkened, doleful day read the fate of the whalemen who had gone before me,” Ishmael says, in “Moby-Dick.” “Yes, there is death in this business of whaling—a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then?”

The big-risk-big-reward ethos of startups is fuelled by venture capitalists who know that they won’t be the ones to go broke.

For those who made it through the earthly trials, there could be riches in tow. A captain’s cut of the takings ranged from five to twelve per cent; a first mate’s, three to seven per cent; and so on, down the line. A captain with some skill could spend a few years leading expeditions and retire rich. In 1853, the *Times* described the whaling town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, as “probably the wealthiest place” in the United States.

The people on the boat, however, weren’t the largest earners. Dispatching a whaling voyage cost between twenty and thirty thousand dollars, a small fortune in the mid-nineteenth century, and an industry emerged to get these expeditions off the dock. Specialized agents in whaling-industry towns invested their own money, pooled cash from rich investors, did due diligence, and worked with captains to develop winning strategies and to plot uncrowded routes. In most cases, their efforts were fruitless: data from a couple of whaling ports in Massachusetts in 1858 suggest that fully two-thirds of returning expeditions were unprofitable; another study found that a third of the whale ships in the New Bedford fleet never made it home. A lucky outing, though, could return with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in goods, a fortune several times the outlay, and for many investors this was enough to justify the risk.

In “V.C.: An American History,” the Harvard Business School professor Tom Nicholas sees whaling as the first practice of what we now call venture capital: collecting large pots of money and using it to invest in young companies, while also getting involved in their management, in the hope of guiding growth and generating huge returns. Venture capitalists fill these cash pots, or funds, with money from large-scale investors—foundations,

ILLUSTRATION BY YIFAN WU

pension funds, university endowments, and other passive contributors. They take a management fee, drop a bit of their own money into the mix, and, like the whaling agents, promise expertise. They, too, make predominantly bad bets: about eighty per cent of venture investments don't pay off. Occasionally, though, there is a wild success, and, since the nineteen-seventies, such successes have transformed American business. Venture capital backed Apple and Intel. It funded Google, Amazon, and Facebook before any of them turned a profit. In principle, venture capital is where the ordinarily conservative, cynical domain of big money touches dreamy, long-shot enterprise. In practice, it has become the distinguishing big-business engine of our time. Can it offer both returns?

Much as a private table at the Casino de Monte-Carlo is off limits to those who can't pony up for chips, venture capital is off limits to most of us as a direct investment. Funds typically have at least a million-dollar buy-in, available only to accredited investors, so unless you're the Monopoly Man you'll be unable to put your daughter's college fund into some of that. Yet most of us now have daily contact with the world of venture capital, because its sphere of influence has exploded. Once, venture capital was sought by risky startups needing lots of up-front cash, whether for research and development (Genentech had to fund academic-grade research before it had a product to bring to market) or for essential leaps in scale (Uber is appealing only if it's big enough to get a car to you quickly). Such financing seemed especially suited to proprietary technology, which was expensive, hard to seed into the market, and yet, if things went right, extremely lucrative. That has changed. Since extending its focus to direct-to-consumer retail, venture capital has come to fund delivery services, financial services, car companies, shoe companies, office real estate, leisure real estate, coffee brewers, beer brewers, smoothies, razors, trousers, speakers, scooters, mattresses, toothbrushes, socks, and underwear.

This realm of direct commerce could be called Venture World. You know what its businesses are like. They appear suddenly, everywhere, with chatty ad campaigns on public transit starring cool, young people who were clearly nerds in high school but who have since mastered impressive dance moves. They tell you that their products aren't just better; they are simplifying the whole deal, changing how stuff works across society, and not a moment too soon. If you are buying an actual object and live in a major city, you might find a brick-and-mortar storefront decked with ha-ha-clever wallpaper where you can hold the toothbrush of the future or try one of five purportedly game-changing eyeglass frames. But the bulk of Venture World's offerings are online, where they are hawked on bright, uncluttered sites that scroll down, down, and down again with charming animations, offering moving stories about one big idea that will change the industry, about community, about zero-impact supply chains, which, thanks to their backing, they can afford. In Venture World, everyone seems to be more or less on your wavelength. Its companies are geared toward unfussed people who keep their phones silenced and close. Venture capitalism is behind most of the platforms on which people lament the gaucherie of "late-stage capitalism"; it has become the chief industrial backer of the self-aware, predominantly upper-middle-class approach to life style now called woke.

A marriage between social enlightenment and manic growth defines the business of the past decade. Venture capitalists, having helped officiate the ceremony, often find themselves in awkward standing when the marriage falls apart. In the fall, WeWork, a venture-founded office-rental company, tried to enter the public markets with a forty-seven-billion-dollar valuation and the pixie dust of world-changing rhetoric, only to postpone the I.P.O. indefinitely when the valuation dropped by about seventy-five per cent and its lion-haired C.E.O. resigned amid disturbing revelations about his management style. Before that, there was Theranos, the fraudulent blood-testing company, which, despite the absence of evidence that it could do what it promised, raised a mint in venture-capital funding—then, on the basis of that, hundreds of millions more—and Juicero, which, before the company's abrupt shutdown, in 2017, had raised a hundred and eighteen million dollars for seven-hundred-dollar Wi-Fi-enabled squeezers of juice packets. Last week, news broke that Zume—a startup whose business centered on pizza par-baked by robots, then loaded into delivery trucks filled with ovens that finished each pie en route to its destination—had been compelled to lay off more than half of its employees because SoftBank's venture-capital arm, which had already invested three hundred and seventy-five million dollars in the company, had backed away from further funding, wanting Zume to pursue more aggressive "global domination" in its pizza craft. The startup (which, despite its robust funding, delivered pizza to only a small portion of the San Francisco Bay Area) is pivoting its business to "compostable molded-fiber packaging."

Could there be a moral to such embarrassments? Maybe occasional high-profile mortifications keep an essentially healthy system honest. This is what a lot of wealthy entities seem to think, given recent record-breaking growth in V.C. fund-raising: in 2018 venture capitalists, as a group, loaded more than fifty-six billion dollars into their funds.

And yet a seepage of doubt is spreading, notably among venture capitalists themselves. "It's a venture-capital-finance boom, where, within a mile of this building, there are somewhere between five hundred and a thousand startups," a withered specimen of the old school told me a few years back, gazing out his window, across San Francisco. "But they're not *companies*." Viewers of "Shark Tank"—the reality show on which entrepreneurs pitch to regal investors dressed in midlife-crisis clothes—could be forgiven for coming away with the impression, shared by many startup founders, that getting funded is itself proof of value. The public markets often disagree. In recent years, it has become common for venture-backed companies like Facebook and Uber to wilt in share value subsequent to their public offerings—which happens to be the period when many venture capitalists distribute their stake back to investors.

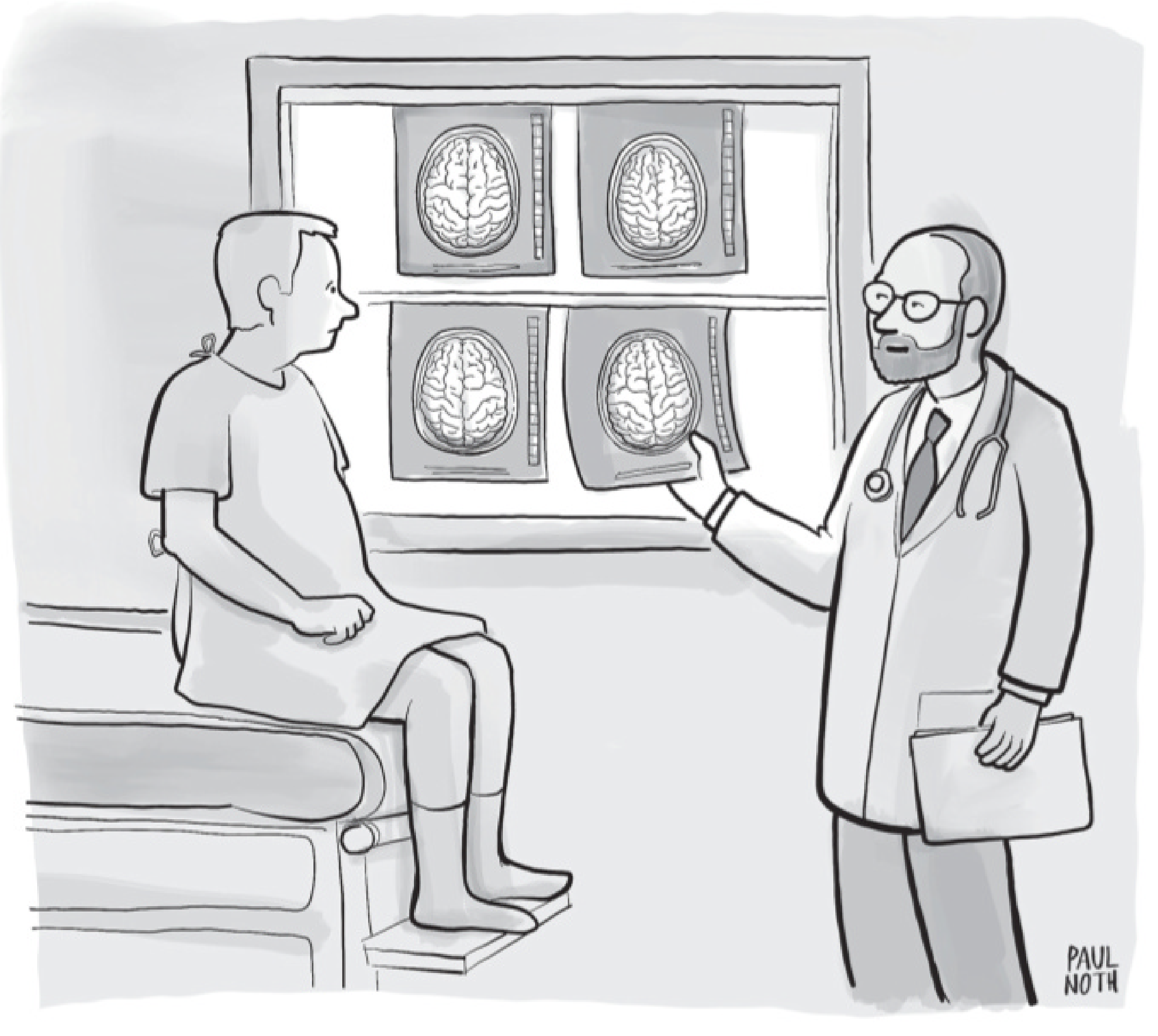
On the money tree of contemporary finance, venture capital comes off the branch of private equity: the buying and selling of shares of companies which aren't publicly available, ostensibly to turn a profit while helping businesses thrive and grow. When people speak of "private equity," however, they usually mean funds that move on mature companies, often with the goal of restructuring and selling them as if flipping a house. Venture capitalists are different. They buy equity from brand-new or young companies, and they generally cannot get their money out until the startup enters the public market or is acquired by a larger company, like a herring being swallowed by a tuna. This is what happened to Instagram, when it was bought by Facebook, or YouTube, upon its acquisition by Google. Acquisitions are one reason that, despite the efflorescence of new startups, power in tech flows toward the giants at the top.

Another way that venture capital is unlike private equity proper, Nicholas explains in his first-rate history, is that the venture-capital industry was itself a product of speculative funding, tamed and coddled into being by the U.S. government. It started, as most American things do, with excess. By the late nineteen-twenties, one per cent of American families earned nearly a quarter of the United States' income and held half of its wealth. Many set up investment vehicles, some specializing in high-risk offerings. Laurance Rockefeller, a grandson of John D., began putting "venture" money into untested aviation companies. Nicholas calculates that he could have made more in the stock market, but Rockefeller was undeterred. "Venture capital endeavors are not for the impatient," he remarked. "Nor are they for widows and orphans or people who cannot afford to lose."

During the Depression and the Second World War, patient, deep-pocketed investors were in short supply. "The 1930s brought more progressive taxation," and it "was frequently argued that this diminished the supply of entrepreneurial finance," Nicholas writes, sounding as scrupulously objective as the butler at a swingers' party. Put more baldly, Franklin D. Roosevelt soaked the rich. In 1935, his Administration imposed a seventy-five-per-cent tax—then widely known as the "wealth tax"—on incomes greater than five million dollars. A year later, it instituted a tax on undistributed corporate profits, in theory giving businesses an incentive to disburse more earnings to workers. Such policies helped rebuild the American middle class in the depths of the Depression; they also pinched super-rich parties trying to grow their wealth. Nicholas quotes the then head of the Investment Bankers Association of America: "No one in the high income tax brackets is going to provide the venture capital and take the risk which new enterprises and expansion require, and thereby help create new jobs, if heavy taxes take most of the profit when the transaction is successful."

This was and remains a standard plea for tax breaks for the rich. Yet, during the Second World War, the government raised taxes further while plowing taxpayers' money into business growth. Prospective innovators were paid four hundred and fifty million dollars—about five billion dollars in today's money, by Nicholas's calculations—in government contracts. When the war ended, the G.I. Bill helped talented people get technical training and social access, expanding the pool of potential entrepreneurs. The war and its aftermath, which saw the growth and reimagining of such companies as I.B.M. and Hewlett-Packard—plus the first programmable digital computers, the jet engine, mass-produced antibiotics, and oodles more—was by most measures a golden age of American innovation. It happened largely on the government's tab.

Venture capital itself was a beneficiary of such support. In 1958, Congress passed an act designed to encourage small-business investments and loans. If a small-business investment company could raise a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the government would match those funds and lend more at a low rate, bringing the fund to at least four hundred and fifty thousand dollars (nearly four million in current dollars). These investors received tax advantages, too. The lure invited fraud,



"And this is our youngest, Timothy, who's starting at Hotchkiss this fall."

and the fund-matching program was brought to an end.

By then, however, the friendly financial loopholes were on the books, and a pool of interested parties had assembled. Nicholas quotes early venture capitalists saying that they wouldn’t have got into the game if it hadn’t been for federal incentives; venture capital transformed from the pursuit of a few ultra-wealthy scions into a true profession. In the seventies, the government relaxed certain regulations—allowing pension funds to make high-risk investments, for instance—and lowered capital-gains taxes. These changes, plus firms’ embrace of limited partnerships, a legal structure that offered further tax shelters and protected passive investors, brought financial growth to the community that the incentives had founded. For the first time, a few venture-capital portfolios began to outperform the public markets. Many prominent venture capitalists now decry government controls and say they favor market meritocracy. That’s ironic, given that their industry exists as such only because of a sequence of supportive actions taken by the government.

Did the government’s investment pay off? Yes, venture capital in the seventies helped bring us Apple, Atari, Genentech, and the like. And, yes, in the nineties it was crucial to the launch of Netscape Navigator, Hotmail, and Google. Now consider a few entities that got off the blocks without a penny from Papa V.C.: Microsoft (Bill Gates sold a five-per-cent share of his already profitable company in 1981, solely to bring an old hand onto the board); the Mosaic browser (federally funded and released free of charge); and Craigslist (which diverted an existing advertising market into its coffers). Subtract venture capital from the landscape of late-twentieth-century innovation, and we would have reached the new millennium with roughly the same technological capacities.

Does this mean that the venture-capital industry itself was the ultimate frothy startup—a solution that we didn’t really need to a problem that we didn’t have? Not only venture capitalists would disagree with such a claim, because the case for venture capital is the case for ambitious risk-taking. Sure, maybe we would still have ended up with a personal computer, a visual Web browser, and even an affordable cell phone without venture capital. But we would have lost the big-risk-big-reward ethos that made these devices totemic innovations and inducements to further invention. A thriving society needs moon shots, and, in the absence of a literal space race, only venture capitalists have the mandate to throw cash at an improbable success.

Traditionally, venture capitalists have calculated that about two in ten investments will generate most of a fund’s profits. A strong fund hopes to achieve a twenty-per-cent return, and so those two in ten winning bets must hit between twenty and thirty times the money invested in them. Usually, returns do not come close. As a whole, the venture-capital industry has significantly outperformed the public markets only in the nineties—a decade that, you will remember, ended with the so-called dot-com bubble bursting, a crisis that Nicholas attributes largely to venture-capitalist profligacy. A chastening study by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in 2012 found that the average venture-capital fund in the previous two decades, far from delivering its promised returns, had scarcely broken even.

Laurance Rockefeller was right, then: what venture capital as a field provides is something other than a great way for investors to make money. But, even if they didn’t prosper, you and I probably did. We might lament the hegemonic power of Amazon or chortle at Pets.com, the dog-and-cat-supply startup whose insanely capitalized launch ended in abrupt liquidation two years later. But what about Groupon, which brought your family a nice dinner in hard times, or the popular vegan Impossible Burger, which purports to reduce animal cruelty but which also, somehow, bleeds? Try making that sales pitch to a government funder or a mainstream investor. Venture capital has offered a path into the market for unsmooth operators and bizarre ideas.

For most of the late twentieth century, V.C.’s realm, like the Tiffany necklace, was a bauble that symbolized the capacities of the entrepreneurial whole. Good value? No, not really. And yet a

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life of total prudence is no life: let's have it. Then, recently, something changed. The bauble started to become the bank.

The *Times* journalist Mike Isaac, in his buoyant and well-reported new book, "Super Pumped: The Battle for Uber," points to the advent of the iPhone as a crucial turning point in venture investment. "The App Store changed the model for software development entirely," he writes. What used to require distribution infrastructure could now be served at a click. What used to be trapped at your desk could be in your pocket, a huge scaling-up of market opportunity that paved the way for companies like Uber. "Venture funds began throwing money at twentysomethings, hoping to stumble into funding the next killer app," Isaac writes. "But the *real* winning apps were backed by top-tier venture capitalists, who made connections to potential partnerships with large companies, built pipelines to faster recruiting, offered strategic advice and, of course, turbocharged growth and marketing with millions of dollars in funding." Spewing cash across the consumer market in pursuit of "unicorns," venture capital expanded beyond a small corner of the finance world. It became an option for anybody with a flashy-seeming new business who wanted—promised—to grow fast.

The pressure of scale fell hardest on startup founders. When venture capitalists take board seats, they are supposed to help guide a company in the best direction. By sheer necessity, though, their most immediate interest is seeing the company grow quickly enough that their equity can reach their own targets. For a young startup, getting bigger faster is not always the best directive. (A thirtyfold return on an investment of several million dollars, we might think, is a lot to ask of a company that specializes in delivering underpants through the mail.) One trend in Venture World has been growing valuations, which in median last year reached a five-year high. Another has been undesirable treatment of employees, who may find themselves overworked, underpaid, or verbally abused. You're unlikely to be a great boss if the people who invested millions in your company are pressuring you to grow, grow, grow or deliver ever-greater efficiencies—or be fired yourself. It doesn't even take a hard-nosed venture capitalist to whip a startup into such a state, because pressure is built into the system itself. Valuations and the economics of dilution (the portion of ownership that entrepreneurs must sell in order to bring more money on board) are spurs to faster growth.

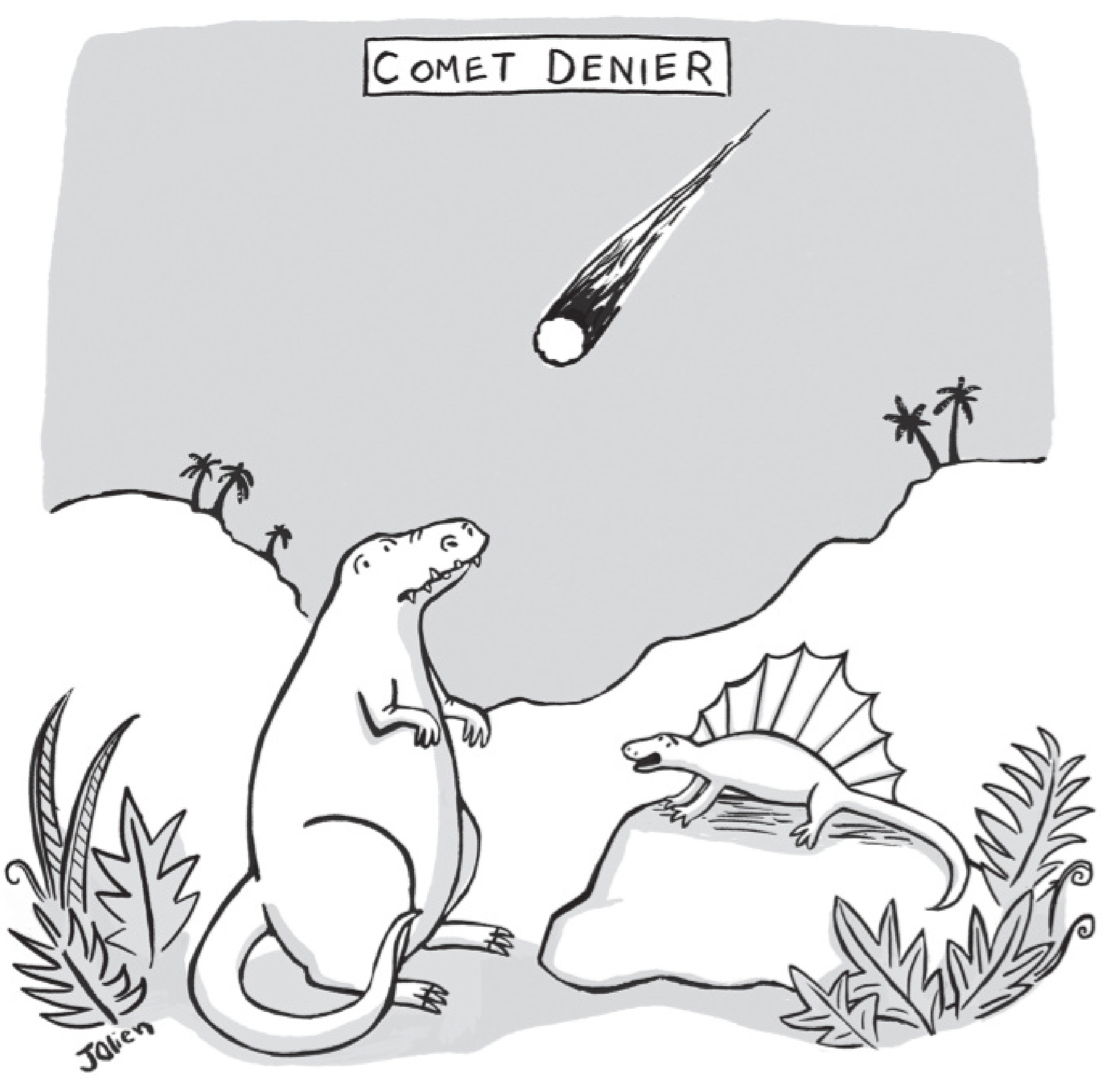
Hence WeWork: a company that absorbed billions of dollars of capital for the purpose of subletting office space, had to bail on its I.P.O., and cut loose its offending C.E.O. with a severance package of more than a billion dollars. The WeWork debacle is illustrative not because it's a case of foolish investment and unchecked mismanagement (life at sea!) but because the company gained value during these shenanigans, at least until it filed for I.P.O.—which startups are doing less often than they once did.

To understand why, we can return to the high-stakes room at the Casino de Monte-Carlo. If you're a venture capitalist, you are, like James Bond, playing mostly with other people's money. Unlike James Bond, you're taking a fee to do it: the more money you start out with on the table (the larger the fund), the more gets slipped into your pocket—and that's before you play your hand. Now imagine that there are two ways to turn your chips back into cash: either you can go to the guy at the window, who will carefully tally and value them (like a startup readied for an I.P.O.), or you can rake all your chips into your hat and sell the whole lot to another player, who may overpay a bit to sweeten the deal and get that lucky je ne sais quoi (like a startup's being acquired). Occasionally, venture capitalists sell shares in a secondary market, too.

Two things should be clear. First, it can be less appealing to cash out at the window: an I.P.O. entails financial scrutiny, regulatory hoops, and other requirements that are designed to protect investors like you and me from the WeWorks of the world. Why go that route if you've got other options? (In the case of WeWork, the push to I.P.O. seems to have been a financial necessity.) Startups hoping to be acquired have less incentive to plan for a lifetime as healthy businesses; like the playboy burning through his savings on fast living and gorgeous suits, they have to keep it appealingly together only long enough to seduce a prosperous spouse-patron.

Second, if you're a venture capitalist you know that you will not be the one to go broke. You might lose all your investors' chips, but you still have fee money pooling in your pocket, and that's more than most people involved in the deal get. Startup founders make big money only if their efforts succeed. End investors get rich—or richer—if the funds in which they have invested yield a good return. Venture capitalists, on the other hand, now make good money regardless, and some firms purporting to prosper through their "carries"—their share of returns—are swelling up mostly on fees. A few successful venture capitalists get ribbed for their grandstanding, dubious blog pontifications, and general "Shark Tank"-ing. But who can blame them? If your business depends on bringing in more and more investment, isn't your first priority burnishing your public image for having special skills and insight? In venture capital, as in a growing number of enterprises, reputation is what pays today.

A looming question is whether venture capital has become too large for its own good. In his book, Nicholas quotes a prominent venture capitalist saying, "This business is just not set up for big bucks." As funds grow, successful venture-capital firms have been moving outside their traditional province. Andreessen Horowitz (which, admirably, reinvested much of its fees to support services for entrepreneurs) last year expanded its range of investment, and announced that its largest new fund would be directed toward "late-stage venture"—that is, mature startups with some proven success—creeping up on the work of mainstream private equity. First financings across the field have



"That thing's always been there."

been declining since 2014. Big risk capital, with more money in the balance, is quietly stepping away from risk.

What does this make it? Chiefly, a great business for some venture capitalists—especially those in firm control of startups being sent toward cash harvests in the pre-dawn of the private markets. Champions of regulating the sphere of private equity, most prominently Elizabeth Warren, have suggested that such models are "rigged." Purely on the basis of risk-reward odds—who is bearing the risk and who is reliably extracting significant wealth—this is a hard claim to dispute. One might wonder why entrepreneurs and investors keep lining up for the privilege of being channelled into what has become a vast financial threshing machine.

They do it in part from competitive pressure: if your rivals are growing wildly at an early stage, and with good hookups, you're obliged to play the game in order to keep up. But they also do it for the chance at the lottery. Jackpots have only become bigger as venture capital has grown overcapitalized; last year exit values, the proceeds from selling shares, topped two hundred billion dollars for the first time.

Institutionalizing venture capital has had good effects. For all its swagger about finding diamonds in the rough, the industry has always been largely about whom you know and what narrative you fit, with firms notoriously favoring socially maladapted young white men. This tendency has begun to change as its costs, financial and social, come to mainstream attention. In 2016, four women in tech—Jennifer Brandel, Mara Zepeda, Astrid Scholz, and Aniyia Williams—put up a widely cited blog post called "Sex & Startups." "Startups, like the male anatomy, are designed for liquidity events," they wrote, suggesting that women—at that point the recipient of only three per cent of venture funding—fight the tyranny of venture capitalists' hockey-stick growth drive and work to fund companies whose successes were more sustainable. A year later, they formalized the idea in a manifesto supporting multicolored and mutualistic "zebra" companies. ("Unlike unicorns, zebras are real.") A new generation of smaller-scale venture capitalists are indeed focussing resources on startups led by people underrepresented in tech leadership, and, for the first time, Venture World is starting to pay attention to the interests of everyone it serves.

Other perils remain unaddressed. It's nice that we're able to get cheap or free stuff from wildly scaled-up unprofitable startups with venture backing. (Recall the brief, bright age of MoviePass.) But how healthy is this norm? Thirty years ago, it was widely understood that, if you wanted to get quality news on your doorstep, you had to send a subscription check through the mail; if you wanted to see a great new movie, you had to fork some bills across the box-office window or the video counter; and if you wanted to take a cab uptown you had to pay the driver the standard fee, plus tip. Venture World has weaned us off these habits of direct exchange. Now we expect certain things to be free, because surely a wealthy, ambitious funder somewhere will be picking up the tab. It is true that we get goods and services on the cheap thanks to venture capitalists pouring money into "pre-revenue" companies. But we also learn to value them less.

The American whaling industry ended largely because the most valuable of those creatures were hunted almost to extinction. In the venture-capital realm today, the risks of fishing out the sea are no less real. Nicholas writes of early venture capitalists' sense of "social responsibility," by which he means that they didn't regard growth toward profit as their primary goal. Making the planet a better place gets a lot of discussion in Venture World, but it is sometimes as simple as constructing a company that is useful and sustainable, and that treats its employees well. Venture capital, once a small and chancy field, is now a profit machine for its managers, with all that entails. Poorly designed for its scale, rote and entrenched at the higher echelons, it has become vulnerable to a particular sort of change: disruption by a bright, daring idea. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

INDEFENSIBLE

Will the U.S. send an innocent man to Iraq to face almost certain death?

BY BEN TAUB

Omar Ameen could not sleep at home. For years, he had been shuttling between safe houses, terrified that armed men would kidnap or kill him for the crimes of his cousin Ghassan, a member of Al Qaeda. Things often worked that way in Rawah, a small village in Iraq's Anbar Province, where the Ameens had lived for generations. Tribal justice, long-running disputes: rivals denounced rivals as terrorists, and the state took care of the rest. "When you want to get revenge, you get revenge on the entire extended family," Ameen later said. He and his brothers scattered to other parts of Iraq, leaving behind vast tracts of farmland, which were eventually taken by the people who had driven them out. On a chilly evening in early 2012, Ameen sneaked into Rawah and told his friends that he was leaving Iraq forever. He begged them to come with him. "You go first, dear," one of them replied. "If everything goes O.K., we'll follow."

Ameen went to Turkey on a tourist visa, and applied for refugee status with the United Nations. He described to a U.N. representative a life of persecution from all sides. His father had been killed by Al Qaeda, he said, and one of his brothers had been kidnapped by a Shiite paramilitary group. Ameen was nearly forty, and he had wanted to leave Iraq since childhood. Only one per cent of refugees are selected for resettlement in new countries; he figured that victims of terrorism would be put at the top of the list.

Once approved, refugees have no say in where they end up: the U.N. decides whether to make a referral for possible resettlement, and when, and to which country. Ameen's wife, Khansaa, and their three young children soon followed him to Turkey, where, after two years in limbo, Ameen logged in to the U.N.'s refugee portal and found that his family had been selected to resettle in the United States. On November 5, 2014, their plane landed in Salt Lake City. He found work at a Mormon charity and at a factory that produced dietary supplements. The children enrolled in school, and Omar and Khansaa began taking English classes.

That winter, another Iraqi couple from Rawah, who were living in California, visited the Ameens' house. They spoke of the good weather and the opportunities in Sacramento; a few months later, the Ameens moved there.

Before the U.S. invasion, Ameen had worked as a truck driver, transporting cheap Iraqi oil across the desert to Jordan. It was a harrowing job; the sides of the highway were littered with the charred shells of trucks that had crashed and exploded, often with the drivers inside. Ameen learned to drive through fires as quickly as possible, terrified of burning to death. In Sacramento, he began working as an Uber driver and a delivery driver, sometimes pulling twenty-hour shifts to support his family. He also worked part time as a mechanic and became popular within the Iraqi diaspora. He and Khansaa applied for permanent-resident status and had a fourth child—an American citizen.

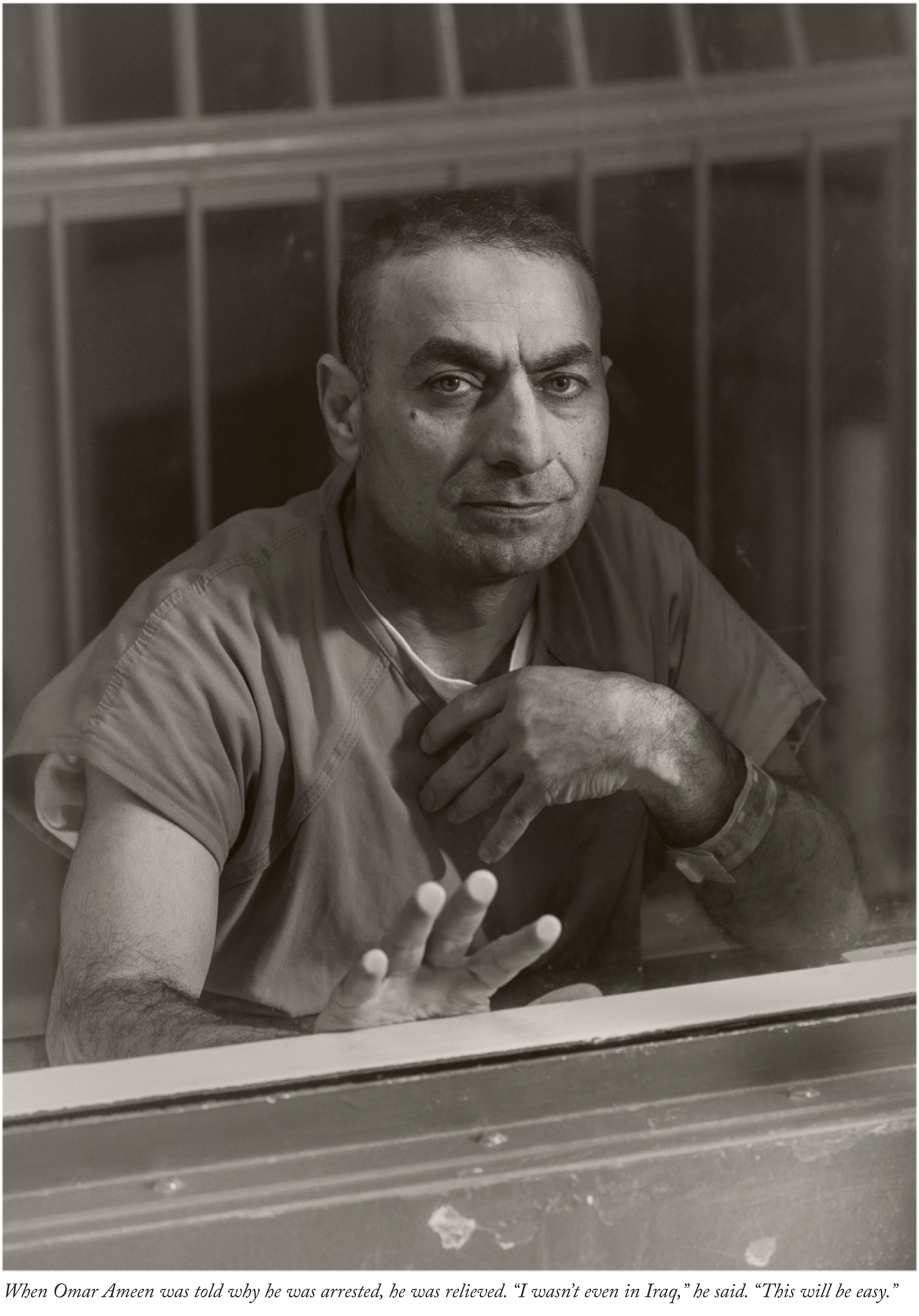
In July, 2018, Ameen sent a letter to his congressman, Ami Bera. "I called 2 times but I didn't get any information about when I can get my green card," he wrote. "I start having problems when I apply to the work because they asking about green cards." Bera inquired with Citizenship and Immigration Services, which replied that it was "unable to render a decision on Omar Ameen application until certain issues are resolved." Bera's office forwarded the note to Ameen on August 13th.

Two days later, Ameen awoke to the sound of pounding on his apartment door. His son rushed into the bedroom and told him that there were dozens of armed men outside, and cars with flashing lights. When Ameen opened the door, he was placed in handcuffs. Television-news crews arrived at the scene. An anonymous caller had supplied them with Ameen's address, along with a hint of the news: the Joint Terrorism Task Force had captured a high-level ISIS commander in the refugee stream.

A few miles west, in downtown Sacramento, a federal public defender named Ben Galloway heard that an Iraqi extradition case had just been made public. He skimmed through the court filings, which were heavily redacted, and learned that Ameen was accused of killing a police officer in Rawah, as part of an ISIS hit squad, a few months before he entered the United States. The government intended to send him back to Iraq, where he would stand trial for murder.

Galloway met Ameen at a federal building, where he was being held behind a mesh screen. Galloway, at six feet six, towered over Ameen by a foot. "It was a little difficult to see Omar, but quite easy to hear each other," he recalled. With the help of an interpreter, Galloway summarized the criminal complaint. Ameen listened intently, elbows on the table, head hunched forward. As he began to understand the charge, he was overcome with relief. "I wasn't even in Iraq at the time of the murder," he said. "This will be easy."

Soon after Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President, he began saying that terrorist groups had infiltrated the flow of refugees into the U.S. "We have no idea where they're coming from," he said, in an interview with ABC. "This could be one of the great Trojan horses ever, since the original." Shortly before the election, he said, in a debate with Hillary Clinton, that Muslim refugees in the U.S. were "definitely,



When Omar Ameen was told why he was arrested, he was relieved. "I wasn't even in Iraq," he said. "This will be easy."

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK MAHANEY

Wait...what was it I came up here for?
I can't remember!
SOFIA WARREN

in many cases, ISIS-aligned." His son Donald, Jr., a senior campaign adviser, posted on Twitter, "If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you. Would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem."

Security and intelligence officials found the rhetoric absurd: refugees are the most thoroughly vetted category of people entering the U.S. Candidates are screened by the C.I.A., the N.S.A., the F.B.I., the Department of Defense, and several other agencies before they arrive. They are interviewed by Homeland Security officers who have received training in identifying lies, along with intelligence briefings about the applicants' country of origin. An office within the D.H.S. called the Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate carries out open-source and classified research on candidates from certain backgrounds. Biographical and biometric information is run through numerous databases and watch lists, including Interpol's Foreign Terrorist Fighter Database, which is informed by the collective investigative capacity of fifty-two countries. The process often takes more than a year, and any red flag is ground for rejection, with no further explanation.

The U.S. is particularly well equipped to find incriminating facts about applicants from Iraq. Between 2003 and 2011, the Department of Defense collected hundreds of millions of pages of information on Iraqis. "Some of what I have seen is really good information, and some of it cannot possibly be true," a former senior U.S. official, who has spent decades working in the Middle East, told me. "Like, some poor kid is never going to go anywhere in his life because a friend chose to diss him to a D.O.D. employee, and now he's blacklisted in the U.S. and European systems forever." The U.S. military has also collected millions of Iraqi fingerprints and iris scans. As a former member of the National Security Council told me, "If you're an intended terrorist, why would you go through that insane amount of vetting and waiting when you could literally just get a tourist visa?"

In fact, the most obvious way in which refugees have not assimilated into American life is their failure to commit violent acts. A study by the Cato Institute found that "the chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year." The three refugees who brought the historic probability above a flat zero were Cuban; they entered the U.S. before Congress passed the Refugee Act, in 1980, which standardized the vetting process. Since then, more than three million refugees have entered the U.S., and the screening has grown ever more comprehensive.

Yet, during the campaign, Trump said that he would "absolutely" track the movements of Muslims, and require them to register in a database. At a rally in New Hampshire, when Trump invited questions from the audience, a man stood up and said, "We have a problem in this country. It's called Muslims." An audience member winced; Trump nodded. "We know our current President is one," the man said.

"Right," Trump said. "We need this question!"

"When can we get rid of them?"

"We're going to be looking at that," Trump replied.

Then Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Jeff Sessions, of Alabama, became the first senator to endorse him. Sessions started advising Trump on immigration policy, and he became the chairman of the campaign's national-security committee. "We are a Christian nation," he told the State Department's top official on refugee policy. After winning the election, Trump announced that Sessions would be his Attorney General.

In Sessions's first few intelligence briefings, James Comey, the F.B.I. director, had to explain to him the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, and which terrorist groups followed which interpretation of Islam. Sessions struggled to focus but remained inflexible in his convictions. "Sessions believed that Islam—inherently—advocated extremism," Andrew McCabe, the deputy director of the F.B.I. between 2016 and the beginning of 2018, writes in his memoir, "The Threat: How the FBI Protects America in the Age of Terror and Trump." In a radio interview, Sessions said, of jihadi attackers, "Their faith commands them to do these things." During Sessions's first month as Attorney General, he directed the F.B.I. to pursue counterterrorism investigations into refugees and asylum seekers. "The narrative was that terrorists and murderers and rapists were coming in through the refugee stream, and, if they don't find one, this is politically untenable," a military-intelligence official told me. It would take just one example—one poisonous Skittle—to lend legitimacy to Sessions's world view.

"They were so intent upon linking refugees and terrorism that they were willing to put false examples out to the public," the former N.S.C. member told me. "And it was deeply concerning to us, because it's a public-safety issue, too. Imagine Americans with guns taking matters into their own hands when they see a refugee they've been told is a threat." In June, 2018, in Idaho, at a three-year-old refugee's birthday party, a man stabbed nine Syrian, Iraqi, and Ethiopian refugees, six of whom were children. The birthday girl died.

On March 6, 2017, Sessions announced that "more than three hundred people who came here as refugees are under F.B.I. investigation for potential terrorism-related activities." Career officials were aghast. "What they left out is that these investigations are based on the vaguest scraps of information"—such as tips about neighbors wearing burqas—"and almost none of them go anywhere," the military-intelligence official said. "They're really only looking at, like, five or six people per year."

Six months later, at a meeting of the National Security Council deputies committee, Russell Travers, the acting deputy director of the National Counterterrorism Center, told high-ranking career officials that there was little to no risk of terrorist groups trying to infiltrate the refugee program. Rachel Brand, who was the third-ranking official at the Justice Department, objected. "The Attorney General disagrees with your findings," she said. Travers pointed out that his agency had relied on the Justice Department's own sources to come to this conclusion. "Nonetheless, the Attorney General does not agree," Brand said. By that point, vetted refugees were the targets of ten per cent of all counterterrorism investigations in the United States.

The White House fundamentally altered the refugee program to give priority to people with white and non-Muslim backgrounds. Insisting that the vetting system was inadequate, the Administration created new obstacles for refugees travelling from eleven countries, almost all of which are predominantly Muslim. According to a study by Reuters, the numbers of resettled applicants from those countries were reduced by ninety-eight per cent. Even as the Administration cut the total number of refugees by more than half, it tripled the percentage of Europeans. In 2018, three times more Moldovan refugees were admitted than Syrians, even as more Syrians were living as refugees than there were people living in Moldova.

Ameen's case had already attracted a second look. During the summer of 2016, two F.B.I. agents questioned one of Ameen's cousins, a computer scientist named Musab, as part of Musab's application for asylum. They repeatedly asked him about terrorism in Rawah, even though Musab had grown up elsewhere in the Middle East and had never been to Iraq. When pressed about his relatives from Rawah, Musab recalled that two or three cousins, including Ameen, had visited him in Jordan, in the nineteen-nineties. He remembers telling the F.B.I. that he hadn't spoken to these cousins since, and had no idea whether they later joined the insurgency. But, in the F.B.I. report, an agent wrote that Musab had "guessed that these cousins have become Islamic militants."

Three weeks later, the F.B.I. asked one of Omar Ameen's childhood acquaintances, who now lives in Florida, to explain the connection between Ameen and Ghassan, the cousin who was a member of Al Qaeda. To locals in Rawah, "Omar and his family were always known to not be like Ghassan," the summary reads. "Ghassan's actions brought disrespect negative attention to Omar's family so they left the area."

During the summer of 2017, an F.B.I. special agent travelled to a military base in Anbar Province, to learn more about Ameen from Abd al-Jabbar Barzan, a colonel in a local militia and a U.S.-military informant. The government suspected that Ameen had committed immigration fraud. Although he had reported in his refugee application that his father had been killed by Al Qaeda, Barzan procured for the F.B.I. a copy of Ameen's father's death certificate, which showed that the cause of death was a cerebral clot. But that wasn't enough. "They wanted witnesses from me," Barzan later said.

According to a former mayor of Rawah, Barzan's family moved there about twenty-five years ago, and Barzan became involved in a dispute between two families. He sided with one of them, and started beating members of the other with a club. Tribal rules in Rawah held that an outsider who is adjudicating a dispute may not participate in physical violence, so locals decided to banish him. "Ameen's family and tribe took the lead," the former mayor said, and Barzan never forgave them. (Barzan denies the incident and says that he isn't motivated by revenge.) Barzan returned to his home town, which was close to an Iraqi air-force base. After the U.S. invasion, the Americans took over the base and renamed it Al Assad, and Barzan found work as an informant. Soon afterward, Barzan told me, Ghassan Ameen participated in an attack that injured Barzan's mother.

After meeting with the F.B.I., Barzan discussed the investigation of Omar Ameen with a teen-age boy whom the U.S. government came to refer to as Person Five. He had memory issues and delusions of grandeur. "When I was nine years old I was fighting against Al Qaeda," Person Five later said. "I'm young, but I'm as wise as an entire country." Person Five had been in Rawah in 2014, when ISIS took over the town and murdered his uncle, a former police officer named Ihsan Jasim. Person Five was inconsolable, and developed what he referred to as a "psychological condition." His grandparents had to lock him inside the house, to prevent him from going out into the streets and hitting people. "Whenever I remember what happened, every now and then, all my body shivers and shakes," Person Five said. "I get irritable. I get up and start hitting the doors. Anyone who comes near me, I hit him." Eventually, his grandparents sent him away from Rawah, because he kept trying to get his hands on a gun. Barzan took Person Five in and provided him with shelter, a weapon, and a role in his tribal militia. In recent years, Person Five said, he has come to think of Barzan "like my father."

Person Five had never met Ameen, but he had heard of his family. One day, according to Person Five, Barzan pulled out his phone and showed him a photo of Ameen, which Barzan had obtained from Facebook. He told Person Five that Ameen was living in America, and that the F.B.I. was asking about him. Person Five replied that Ameen was the man who had killed his uncle Ihsan.

Barzan set about collecting witness statements against Ameen, and, on September 21, 2017, an F.B.I. special agent named Phillip Coonfield met him at Al Assad airbase. Barzan showed Coonfield three handwritten statements saying that Ameen had killed Ihsan. Two of the statements bore seemingly identical signatures—a misshapen "A"—which did not belong to any of the supposed witnesses. (Barzan maintains that the documents are authentic.) Coonfield photographed the statements with his phone, and Barzan said that he'd take the originals to an Iraqi court, for certification.

A month later, Barzan returned with Person Five. Coonfield welcomed him, along with a colleague, Special Agent Emerson Lopez-Fuentes, who had met Barzan at least twice. Neither agent speaks Arabic, but, with the help of an interpreter, they led Person Five to a private room, and offered him water and snacks. According to Lopez-Fuentes's writeup of the meeting, Person Five described Ameen as a hardened criminal, a former Al Qaeda member who had planted I.E.D.s and was "a very close friend/associate to Abu Bakr Al Bagdadi," the head of the Islamic State. Person Five recalled "seeing Omar and Abu Bakr Al Bagdadi out in public," giving money to people in the streets; he said that Baghdadi, after declaring the caliphate and becoming the highest-level terrorist target on earth, had visited Ameen's home on at least two occasions. He named as Ameen's accomplice a man who doesn't exist, and offered a time line that defied reality, placing Ameen in Rawah during months that he was living in Turkey and the U.S. When Person Five recounted his uncle's murder, he choked up. "I have a strong recollection of the emotional toll the narrative took on the witness, which I attribute, among other things, to his young age," Coonfield later wrote in an affidavit.

Barzan then provided other witnesses to the F.B.I., none of whom had seen Ihsan's murder but all of whom said bad things about the Ameens.

Coonfield and Lopez-Fuentes later attested to their extensive experience dealing with terrorists: between them, they have interviewed several hundred suspected ISIS members. Nevertheless, Person Five's most outlandish statements became part of the official U.S. record. "There is a hierarchy in the quality of systems for collecting, vetting, and evaluating information in complex overseas environments," the former senior U.S. official told me. "And F.B.I. is at the bottom of that list. I have, in my life, encountered highly classified information from F.B.I. sources which just simply could not be true." He sighed. "They try really, really hard. But they just do not have the area or language or cultural expertise to understand what's going on outside of the United States—especially somewhere like Anbar," where tribal relationships inflect local dynamics, and where Americans can't safely leave Al Assad base.

In early April, 2018, the F.B.I. notified Iraq's intelligence service that an investigation into visa fraud had transformed into a murder case with Iraqi jurisdiction. Agents passed along Person Five's name, as well as a general summary of his statement, and the Iraqis agreed to pursue the case. During the next few days, Iraqi intelligence officers interviewed the F.B.I.'s witnesses, and recycled their allegations into an official intelligence assessment. They added a new mistake, claiming that, in 2007, Ameen had carried out Al Qaeda operations with his cousin Ghassan; in fact, Ghassan had been in Iraqi custody since 2005.

"The U.S. government wanted to find a case where we could actually implement the extradition treaty," Douglas Silliman, who was the Ambassador to Iraq throughout the investigation into Ameen, told me. In 1934, shortly after Iraq gained independence from the United Kingdom, the U.S. entered into an extradition treaty with the Kingdom of Iraq; after a dozen coups, decades of antipathy, and the American invasion, the treaty is still in effect. "It takes an act of parliament to get out of a treaty," Silliman, who is now the president of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, said. "A successor state—no matter how that successor state came into being—is generally considered by the international community to be on the hook for whatever agreements the previous government made, whether they like it or not." No one has ever been extradited from the United States to Iraq. "So the thinking is, Boy, if we can be the first ones to do it, wouldn't that set a useful precedent?" he said. "There are an awful lot of people still in Iraq in whom the F.B.I. might be interested for prosecutions in the United States."

On April 15, 2018, Person Five testified in a terrorism court in Baghdad before an investigative judge named Dhiya Ja'far. Three F.B.I. observers attended, including the U.S. Embassy's assistant legal attaché, J. P. Butsch, whose role was to coördinate between American and Iraqi institutions. Person Five took the legal oath and conjured a new fiction: that Ameen had kidnapped three of his uncles. (They were abducted in November, 2016, two years after Ameen moved to America.) After the interview, Person Five identified Ameen from a photo, and Dhiya announced that Person Five's statement was "sufficient evidence to continue his investigation of Ameen."

Butsch speaks conversational Arabic, and is a careful, forthright investigator. After an F.B.I. source provided a document showing that Ameen had been detained by the Iraqi Army in 2008, Butsch tracked down the general who had been in charge of the brigade and asked him to authenticate it. The general replied that it was a forgery—his own title was incorrect, the stamp looked suspicious, and someone had faked his signature—and Butsch reported the exchange through official channels.

But, when Dhiya scheduled two new witnesses to testify, he informed Butsch with too little time to arrange a security detail, which was required for all Embassy travel outside the Green Zone. Butsch missed the hearing. The documents that emerged from it contained white-outs and revisions; the only reference to Ameen appeared in a format different from the rest of the text. "If a government gives us documents—especially if a court system gives us documents and certifies them as correct—we generally take them at face value," the former senior U.S. official said. "But Iraqi legal systems are not American legal systems."

Butsch wrote in an affidavit, "On several occasions, both Judge Dhiya and the president of the High Judicial Council, Faiq Zaidan"—Iraq's top judicial official—"communicated to me the importance of a successful extradition request." He continued, "It would signify that their system of justice was respectable and trustworthy and it would demonstrate they are capable of engaging in cooperative, diplomatic exchanges." But, because the government of Iraq "lacked expertise," Butsch said, it fell to him to help various Iraqi departments draft an extradition request that would be accepted in a U.S. court. The F.B.I.'s International Operations Division named him Agent of the Year in 2018.

In Sacramento, Audrey Hemesath, an Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of California, drafted a memo in support of Ameen's extradition. Extradition law places unique restrictions on a judge and on a defense team. "Foreign states requesting extradition are not required to litigate their criminal cases in American courts," she wrote, quoting case law, and for that reason a judge must treat evidence within an extradition packet "as true." A judge's only meaningful role is to accept or reject whether the evidence that the foreign government provides amounts to "probable cause."

"The idea is that we have enough trust in the requesting country, and in their systems, that we can defer to their expertise and integrity in evaluating the evidence," David A. Martin, who has served in the State Department and the D.H.S., and has shaped decades of U.S. immigration law, told me. "The executive branch, through the treaty, has blessed the trustworthiness of that process." Yet the U.S. government often refuses extradition requests, even from allies. Since 2016, the U.S. has stonewalled Turkey's demands that the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen be extradited, to face charges of plotting a coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Earlier this month, the State Department rejected and described as "highly inappropriate" a request from the United Kingdom seeking the extradition of an American diplomat's wife; she had killed a British teen-ager when driving on the wrong side of the road and fled the U.K. while claiming diplomatic immunity.

In 2018, the State Department published a human-rights report concluding that Iraqi judges were sentencing thousands of Sunni men and teen-agers to death solely on the basis of confessions that had been elicited through torture. That summer, I was in Baghdad, reporting on the Iraqi government's campaign of vengeance after the defeat of ISIS. I watched death-penalty trials that lasted as little as four minutes. In one case, a judge ordered the execution of a man whose body was so broken from torture that he could hardly move or speak. He had suffered a brain hemorrhage during his interrogation, and, as his lawyer explained, he couldn't possibly have carried out the terrorist attack to which he had confessed—the police report said that it was a suicide bombing.

The State Department also reported that Iraqi prison conditions were "life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, and

BRIDE

How long have I been wed
to myself? Calling myself

darling, dressing for my own
pleasure, each morning

choosing perfume to turn
me on. How long have I been

alone in this house but not
alone? Married less

to the man than to the woman
silvering with the mirror.

I know the kind of wife
I need and I become her:

the one who will leave
this earth at the same instant

I do. I am my own bride,
lifting the veil to see

my face. Darling, I say,
I have waited for you all my life.

—*Maggie Smith*

inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care." Nevertheless, Tom Heinemann, a senior State Department legal adviser, submitted a memo to the court in Sacramento asserting that, for the Ameen case, the extradition treaty was "in full force and effect." "The Court must defer to the Department of State's determination," Hemesath added.

Hemesath presented the case as if the government of Iraq had initiated every stage of it. She cited allegations from the Iraqi and the American investigations as if they independently corroborated each other. In fact, they relied on the same witnesses, and most—and perhaps all—of the witnesses link back to Barzan. The F.B.I. had provided the Iraqi government with a photo of Ameen, from his confidential U.S. immigration file; in the extradition packet, the Iraqis submitted it back to the U.S., stamped, signed, and certified by an Iraqi court.

Hemesath included in her filings almost every rumor that the F.B.I. had heard about Ameen, including allegations that were contradicted by other information in the government's possession. The peculiarities of extradition law mean that the U.S. government never has to prove any of these claims in court.

After Ameen's arrest, the Justice Department issued a press release announcing that an ISIS member had "settled in Sacramento as a purported refugee." Local and national news outlets followed up with details from the extradition packet and Hemesath's detention memo, reporting that Ameen was "one of the founders" of Al Qaeda in Iraq and a "close associate" of its first leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; that he had been the head of financing for Al Qaeda in Anbar Province, as well as the head of Al Qaeda's military operations in Rawah and the surrounding towns; that he had detonated improvised bombs, attacked Iraqi Army checkpoints, and executed prisoners of war; that every male member of his extended family was, "without exception," a terrorist; that in June, 2014, in his capacity as an ISIS commander, he had led a jihadi convoy across the Anbar desert, returned to his home town, and murdered a police officer; and that, despite all this, just a few months after the killing, he had somehow immigrated to the United States via the Refugee Admissions Program, demonstrating its total inability to distinguish victims of persecution from lifelong, committed terrorists.

"When Trump got elected, I expected stuff like this," Galloway, Ameen's lawyer, told me. "But the question for me was: What about professional prosecutors, whom I considered to have integrity—what would it do to them?"

On the afternoon of the arrest, Hemesath handed Galloway an unsigned document, drafted from the perspective of Ameen, stipulating that he was waiving his right to a defense and would "agree to be transported in custody, as soon as possible, to Iraq." She asked if the defense would be willing to sign it. "From that point, I knew that this case would pose all sorts of challenges," Galloway told me. He decided to recruit Rachelle Barbour, a federal defender who has worked in Sacramento for the past twenty years, to join Ameen's defense.

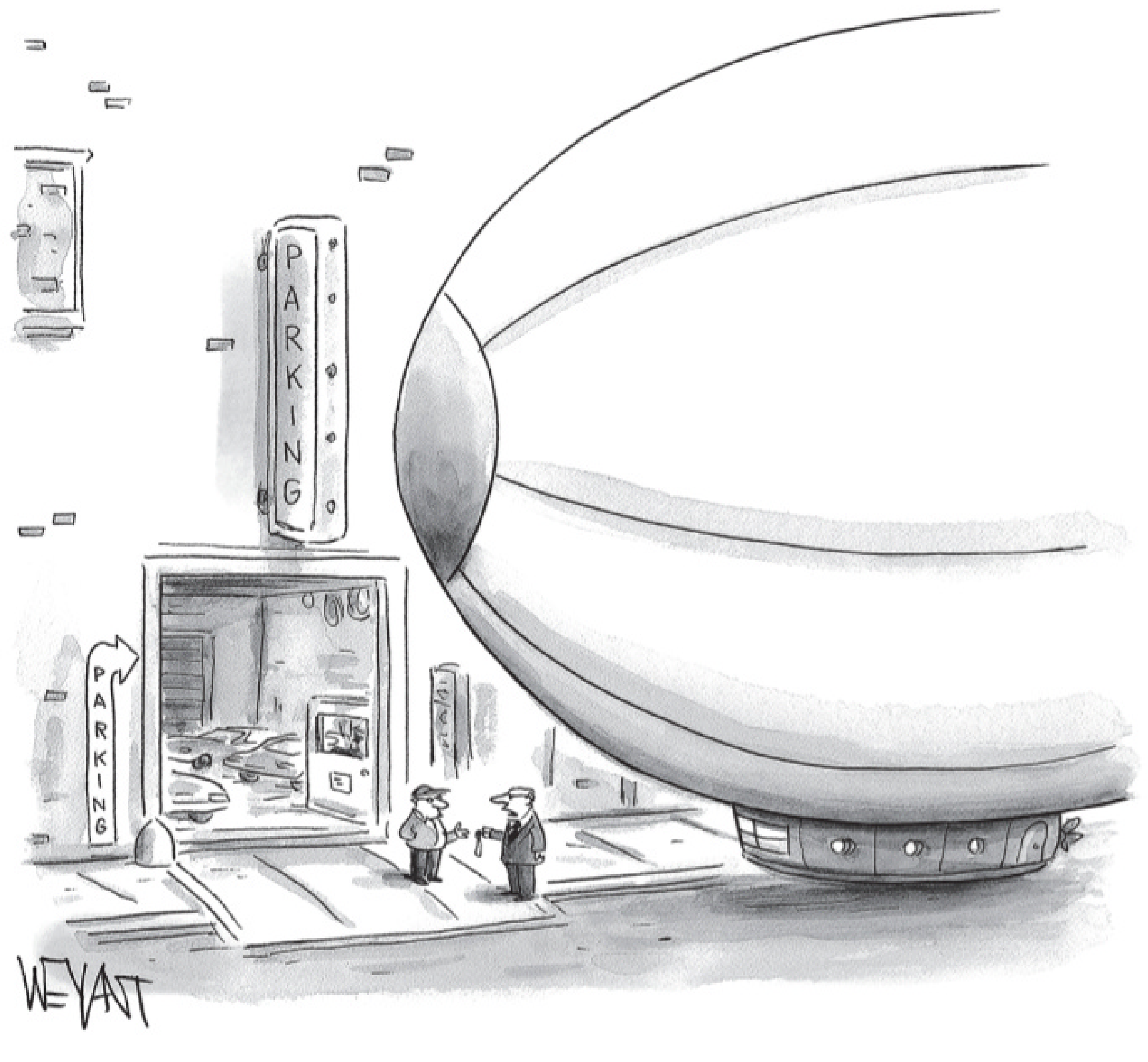
One day, Barbour and Galloway noticed that the government had submitted a secret filing. They couldn't access its contents. Galloway has a security clearance, but Hemesath, who had written the document, cited "national security" and refused to share it with him.

Two months later, Galloway still didn't know what it said. The prosecutors had told him only the gist of it. In a private hearing, to decide whether the document should remain secret, Hemesath urged the judge to consider allowing the government to retract the filing altogether.

"Would the defense not be allowed to mention that the government has acknowledged that it has potentially exculpatory information?" Galloway asked. "I mean, what country is this? Of course we—I mean, the government can take its document back, but we are, I'm sorry. My head is about to explode."

"Why are you prohibited from saying that?" the judge asked.

"The government is vehement that we not disclose this fact on the public docket," Galloway replied. He held his head in his hands. "I—I—I cannot believe this argument is being made. I



"Try not to scratch it."

just can't. There's nothing about that sentence that jeopardizes national security. It jeopardizes their case."

Hemesath's secret filing reveals that, "subsequent to the arrest of Ameen, the United States came into possession of potentially exculpatory alibi information." The evidence, which appears to have been collected as part of a surveillance operation on an unwitting target, reveals that "an individual believed to have been co-located with Ameen in Turkey during the pertinent timeframe claims that Ameen never left Turkey."

For the defense, there was only one chance of defeating the extradition request: it had to "obliterate" probable cause, by proving that Ameen's participation in Ihsan's murder was physically impossible. "We have begged for some type of proof that Omar is actually the terrorist they're making him out to be," Barbour told me. "It would be incredibly reassuring to me and Ben. We could just go to Omar and say, 'Hey, man, they got you. Let's send you back to Iraq.' But every rock we overturn is actually supportive of his innocence."

In early 2019, Barbour filed requests for documents with the Turkish government, and subpoenas to the U.N. Refugee Agency, various N.G.O.s, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, WhatsApp, Yahoo, and Turkcell. She consulted experts on refugee processing. She learned that the U.N. had assigned Ameen to live in Mersin, a coastal city in southern Turkey, and that he wasn't allowed to leave town without written permission from the local police. She tracked down the phone numbers and social-media profiles of people who Ameen told her could vouch for his whereabouts. They were now scattered throughout Europe, Turkey, and Iraq, and, in April, Barbour set off to meet them.

Ameen's immigration file showed that the murder coincided with the peak of his refugee-resettlement process, while his passport was in Turkish possession. A month before the murder, Ameen had been interviewed by a D.H.S. official, at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul. A week before the killing, Ameen was notified that he and his family would be resettled in the U.S. On the evening of June 22, 2014, Ihsan was shot in Rawah. Two weeks later, Ameen was back at the consulate in Istanbul, for a medical screening.

"I remember June, 2014, very well, because ISIS was taking over my home city of Mosul," Omar Hamid, an Iraqi refugee who met Ameen in Mersin, and now lives in Germany, told Barbour at his apartment. "I was very distressed over what might happen to my family. I would meet with Omar on the beach, and he would console me." They would then head back to Hamid's house, log in to the U.N. refugee portal, and check on the status of their applications. Ameen's other friends in town were also Iraqis—a Christian and a Shiite who had renounced Islam and was now an atheist. Together, they followed the news, and tried to check in with relatives in Mosul and Rawah. "I was drinking frequently to cope with the stress," Hamid said. "Omar did not approve of the drinking, but he tolerated it."

In Kufstein, Austria, Barbour carried a printer into a Subway sandwich shop and plugged it in, so that a witness named Ahmed Azzam could sign his sworn declaration that, while ISIS was taking over Anbar Province, Ameen was video-chatting with him from the roof of his apartment in Mersin, along with his wife and kids. "He was very against ISIS and what they were doing," Azzam said. "I remember him saying, 'Those guys, they destroyed Iraq. They made our friends and family homeless.'" Azzam was living in Mosul at the time; a couple of months later, Ameen advised him on Turkish refugee processes, and helped him settle in Mersin.

Barbour interviewed more witnesses in Brussels and Istanbul, then went to the immigration office in Mersin. Ameen and his Iraqi friends were required to sign in each Thursday; failure to do so would have put at risk not only their resettlement applications but their legal status in Turkey. The office provided her scans of Ameen's sign-ins, narrowing the window of time to commit the murder to a logistical impossibility. "To win the literal lottery of life and then say, 'Great, let me put all that at risk so I can travel more than six hundred miles across Syria and Iraq and kill a guy first'—it doesn't make any sense," a former C.I.A. officer, who spent years working in Iraq, told me. "At that point in time, to get through that many checkpoints in Syria, you'd have to have separate fixers for dealing with the Turks, the Free Syrian Army, various other rebel groups, and then ISIS—and that's before you even get to Anbar, which is, you know, hostile. You'd have to bribe or shoot your way through certain fucking death a thousand times, there and back."

On June 15, 2014, a week before the murder, Iraq's Ministry of Communications ordered a complete shutdown of Internet service in Anbar Province. It was not restored for weeks. But, on the day of the murder, Ameen liked a post depicting an Iraqi soldier, prone on the ground, aiming his rifle, with a split in his pants and his bare ass exposed. The caption reads, "The most important thing is the defense of the homeland."

In Sacramento, Ameen was placed in a maximum-security cell at the county jail, where he shared a wall with the Golden State Killer. How had it come to this? All Ameen had ever wanted was to leave Iraq. That was why he had become a truck driver; each time he crossed the Jordanian border, he felt as if he were breaking out of prison. To be alone in nature—that was his feeling of America. He hiked for hours in Utah, and drove all the way to Texas simply because he didn't want to stop driving. In California, he saw the Pacific Ocean and the San Francisco Bay, and swam in the American River, which snakes through the eastern part of Sacramento, a couple of miles from his house.

His children wouldn't visit him in prison; they refused to see him behind bars. He blamed himself. For what? He didn't know, exactly. He worried that his brothers would be hunted down as ISIS suspects, since the Americans had announced that he was a

"Now, in contrast to the last olive oil you tasted, this one is infused with sixty-five more dollars."

commander. Galloway sent him copies of the Harry Potter books in Arabic to distract him, but it wasn't enough.

Ameen stopped eating. "Are you fasting?" a jail guard asked.

"No."

"Do you want to die?"

"Yes."

They took him to the psychiatric ward and wrapped him in a padded jumpsuit, so that he couldn't fashion a noose. They checked on him every thirty minutes and treated him with antidepressants.

He slept. After a few days, he started eating again. He left the psych ward and was returned to his cell.

While Barbour was in Turkey, a defense investigator named Linda Humble pursued a parallel inquiry into the situation in Rawah. The extradition packet contained three witness statements—all certified by Judge Dhiya, in Baghdad—that had been redacted in their entirety. Although the federal defenders' office has a compartmentalized facility for viewing sensitive documents, the government refused to give Galloway and Barbour an unredacted copy. For several months, they were allowed to read the witness statements only at the prosecutor's office.

One of the witness statements was by Person Five; the two others, which had different signatures but were otherwise virtually identical, came from people who hadn't seen Ihsan's murder but had apparently named Ameen as the man who had carried it out. These witnesses became known as Witnesses A and B.

Because of the judge's protective order, Galloway and Barbour were prohibited from sharing any information from the witness statements with Humble. "It was 'O.K., there's this accusation of a murder,'" Barbour recalled telling her. "'Here's a victim. We can't tell you who the witnesses are, or what they said, so you just have to go for it.'"

"I was basically working blind," Humble told me. "But at some point I sat down with the interpreter, and we just started making calls to people in Iraq." Her task was to prove a negative—that Ameen wasn't in Rawah when Ihsan was murdered. But, she said, "there was also this little side note of 'Let's see if we can figure out who actually did this murder.'"

Humble reached a tribal leader who is sanctioned by the Iraqi government to handle security matters in Rawah. According to Humble, he told her, "I'm about five minutes away from the victim's dad. I can just drive over there and see if I can get him on the phone with you guys."

Ihsan's parents were shocked to learn that Ameen had been charged with their son's death. Neither of them had seen the killers—and, to their knowledge, neither had anyone else. "They were asking, 'Do you know who said Omar did it?'" Humble recalled. "We were, like, 'Uh, no, that's something we came to find out from you.'"

In 2014, when ISIS took over Rawah, the parents had five sons. Ihsan was killed that year; three others were kidnapped, in 2016, and probably executed; and the fifth—Person Five's father—was arrested by the Iraqi government, on rumors that he had supported the Islamic State.

One day, during the spring of 2018, Person Five called his grandparents and said that they could help get their son released from prison if they went to Al Karkh court, in Baghdad, and told the truth about the murder. There, in Dhiya's office, they described what little they knew—that, when the shooting began, they were in the back of the house and Ihsan's wife was in the front of the house, but that nobody had seen the actual killer. Dhiya took their statements but never asked about Ameen or showed them his photograph, they said. Ihsan's mother is illiterate; Ihsan's father can read, but didn't go through his statement—he just signed where Dhiya told him to. Ihsan's parents, Humble realized, were Witnesses A and B.

Now they travelled to a court in Anbar Province, where, after an extensive interrogation by a judge, they formally corrected the record. Both parents requested that the charges against Ameen be dropped, and that he be released. "He is innocent of the accusation of murdering my son," Ihsan's mother said.

Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, a retired F.B.I. agent hired by the defense, met Ihsan's widow, Samar, in Iraq. A year after the murder, Samar fled Rawah for Erbil, where she now lives with her brother. She had never been interviewed about the case. Samar vividly remembered the days leading up to the murder. Ihsan's brother was threatened by an ISIS member named Mohammed Aboud. Then Ihsan received a threatening voice mail from Aboud's commander. "Ihsan had me listen to that threat, and he told me that this person would be responsible for his death if anything happened to him," Samar said. Ihsan never mentioned Ameen. On the day of the murder, an ISIS convoy passed by their house twice. The shooting took place on the second pass.

Samar gave Abdel-Hafiz Ihsan's cell phone, which she had kept but never managed to unlock. A forensic investigator in California accessed its contents and found that, at about the time the ISIS convoy made its first pass, Ihsan had texted a member of a local militia who sometimes worked with the Americans. The message appears to be a cry for help. It consists of a list of names, including those who had threatened Ihsan and his brothers, and who later showed up in ISIS propaganda announcing Ihsan's murder and the capture of Rawah. One was the driver. Mohammed Aboud was the gunner. Ameen was not on the list.

The recipient of the text was Barzan.

The project of government relies on nonpolitical career officials following orders, and executing them well. On December 4th, some two dozen federal employees from the F.B.I., the D.H.S., the State Department, and the Justice Department filed into a courtroom in Sacramento for Ameen's extradition hearing. Wittingly or not, they and their departments have been coopted into a campaign to extradite an innocent man to almost certain death, in order to make a racist talking point appear to be slightly less of a fiction.

Federal marshals escorted Ameen to the defense table and unshackled him. He looked back to the gallery, and smiled at Khansaa. Ameen had been so confused, during his arrest, that he didn't say goodbye to his wife and kids. "I thought, There must be some mistake, and I'll be able to come back and explain it to them later," he told me. "So I just walked out, and I didn't even say goodbye."

Hemesath and her co-prosecutor, Heiko Coppola, along with two lawyers from the Justice Department's Office of International Affairs, who had flown in from Washington for the hearing, maintained that nothing the defense had found, in fifteen months of investigation, should be admissible, because it contradicted the contents of Iraq's extradition packet, which "has to be taken as true." In fact, Hemesath argued, "to the extent the defense has raised any nonspeculative evidentiary issues, a trial would be required to resolve the questions raised," and the only appropriate venue would be an Iraqi court.

Even Ihsan's parents' statements exculpating Ameen were invalid; their only admissible testimony was what was written by Dhiya, which they insist is fraudulent. In fact, Hemesath continued, there was now an additional witness, a man who hadn't seen the murder but had learned "through conversations" that Ameen carried it out. The witness, whose identity the government accidentally disclosed, is, like Barzan, a colonel in the tribal militia. He refused to testify before Dhiya, but that didn't matter; the U.S. government had supplied Dhiya with his statement to Special Agent Lopez-Fuentes, and Dhiya had certified it and submitted it back to the U.S. through diplomatic channels. Now it counted as Iraqi evidence, Hemesath explained, and so its admission was "mandatory." She added that the judge cannot consider the question of whether Ameen will be tortured or executed in Iraq, because it is "not subject to judicial review."

In recent months, Galloway has had difficulty sleeping. "It's not the stress of going into the hearing—it's the trauma of coming out of it, the trauma of realizing what they're doing," Galloway told me. "It's unconscionable. Seeing the level of infection, this willingness to go along, it makes me realize that we are not safe." He added, "I hope we can recover from it. I hope we can regain institutional integrity in some of these agencies. None of them is perfect—they all have problematic histories—but this is evil."

Hemesath declined to comment. The F.B.I. declined to comment. The Justice Department declined to comment. The D.H.S. declined to comment. The State Department declined to comment. Earlier this month, during a background briefing about the military strike on Qassem Suleimani, a career State Department official said, "Jesus, do we have to explain why we do these things?"

Throughout the trial, the magistrate judge, Edmund Brennan, has gradually ordered the government to unseal documents; to remove redactions that have obscured inconsistencies, forgeries, or lies; to make F.B.I. agents, whose identities the government had sought to keep secret, available for written and courtroom testimony. He has unsealed transcripts from private hearings, and has granted the defense the necessary time and subpoenas to pursue its parallel investigations in Turkey and Iraq. Without his orders to keep the public record open, most of what is known would still be unknowable—though he may ultimately exclude much of it from his own judicial consideration.

Hemesath has asked Brennan to certify extradition immediately. He has given Barbour and Galloway until January 29th to present their final argument, after which he will issue his ruling. "I feel like we're watching Omar's murder in slow motion," Galloway said.

Meanwhile, in Anbar Province, the F.B.I.'s local fixer, Barzan, considers the Iraqi government to be too corrupt to handle the case. Last fall, in a phone call with a defense investigator, Barzan recalled warning the U.S. government that, if Ameen was sent to Baghdad through official channels, he could bribe his way out of custody.

"But then who do you want them to hand him over to?" the investigator asked.

"Hand him over to me. Hand him over to me—I will get reprisal from him," Barzan said. "Hand him over to me—I will execute him." ♦

In 1973, Roger Deakin, a British writer and environmental activist, acquired a tumbledown sixteenth-century farmhouse outside the ancient village of Mellis, in Suffolk, and began a restoration, repairing stone walls and replacing roof tiles. Among the attributes of Walnut Tree Farm, as the house was called, was a deep, spring-fed moat. It didn't surround the house, as with a fortified castle, but was excavated into the land, in roughly parallel lines, at the front and the back of the property. The moat had served its original, Elizabethan owner as a water supply, a cooler, and a status symbol. Over the centuries, it fell into disrepair, becoming silted up from falling leaves and rotting tree roots. Deakin had the moat dredged to a depth of ten feet; staked a wooden ladder by the bank, near the spreading roots of a willow tree; and began regularly swimming in the cold, greenish water. He gained what he called a frog's-eye view of the changing seasons, and an intimate familiarity with the creatures sharing the moat, from dragonflies to newts.

In the mid-nineties, Deakin took inspiration from the protagonist of John Cheever's short story "The Swimmer"—who traverses his suburban neighborhood pool by pool—and made an aquatic journey around England, Wales, and Scotland, bathing in seas, rivers, ponds, and lakes. Deakin wrote a book about that adventure, "Waterlog" (1999), which has become a classic of British nature writing. His prose is sensuous—"At seaweedy Kimmeridge I mingled with mullet too lazy to move"—and his sense of humor is as dry as his theme is wet. A leech, he observes, keeps changing shape in the water, "looping and stretching out its black stocking of a body, as women do when they're testing tights for quality in Marks & Spencer." The book also displays a lively erudition: when Deakin describes a swim off the virtually unpopulated island of Jura, in the Scottish Hebrides, he notes that George Orwell retreated there to write "1984."

"Waterlog" is subtly political. Deakin was intent on challenging the privatization of once public waters. "The right to walk freely along river banks or to bathe in rivers, should no more be bought and sold than the right to walk up mountains or to swim in the sea from our beaches," he writes. In one rousing

A group of wild swimmers at Blea Tarn, a lake in northwest England, in December, LETTER FROM THE U.K.

GOING FOR THE COLD

Britons have rediscovered the pleasure of swimming in lakes, rivers, and seas—even in winter.

BY REBECCA MEAD

2019. Enthusiasts for the sport claim that immersion in cold water is not only fun; it also improves their mental health.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALICE ZOO

passage, he yells back at censorious river keepers who chastise him for swimming in the trout-filled Itchen, which runs through the grounds of an élite boarding school: "I already felt invigorated after a really first class swim, and now I felt even better after a terrific set-to." For Deakin, swimming in open waters is a subversive act—a way to reclaim nature cordoned off by capitalism, and to "regain a sense of what is old and wild in these islands."

Deakin died, from a brain tumor, in 2006. A year later, Walnut Tree Farm was bought by a couple, Jasmin and Titus Rowlandson, who have maintained his commitment to ungentrified country living. There is still no central heating in the farmhouse; it is warmed by an Aga stove and an enormous open hearth, over which dinner is typically cooked. Last year, Titus, who restores classic automobiles in the barn, and Jasmin, a jeweller and a painter, began offering overnight stays in two renovated cabins on the property. In early November, I took the train from London to Suffolk, with the aim of swimming in Deakin's moat. Heavy rain had fallen all morning, sluicing the windows of the train as it rolled through the port of Ipswich. Deakin's book begins with an ecstatic moat swim in summer rain, amid "water sprites springing up on tiptoe like bright pins over the surface." A chilly, wet autumn day seemed considerably less enchanting.

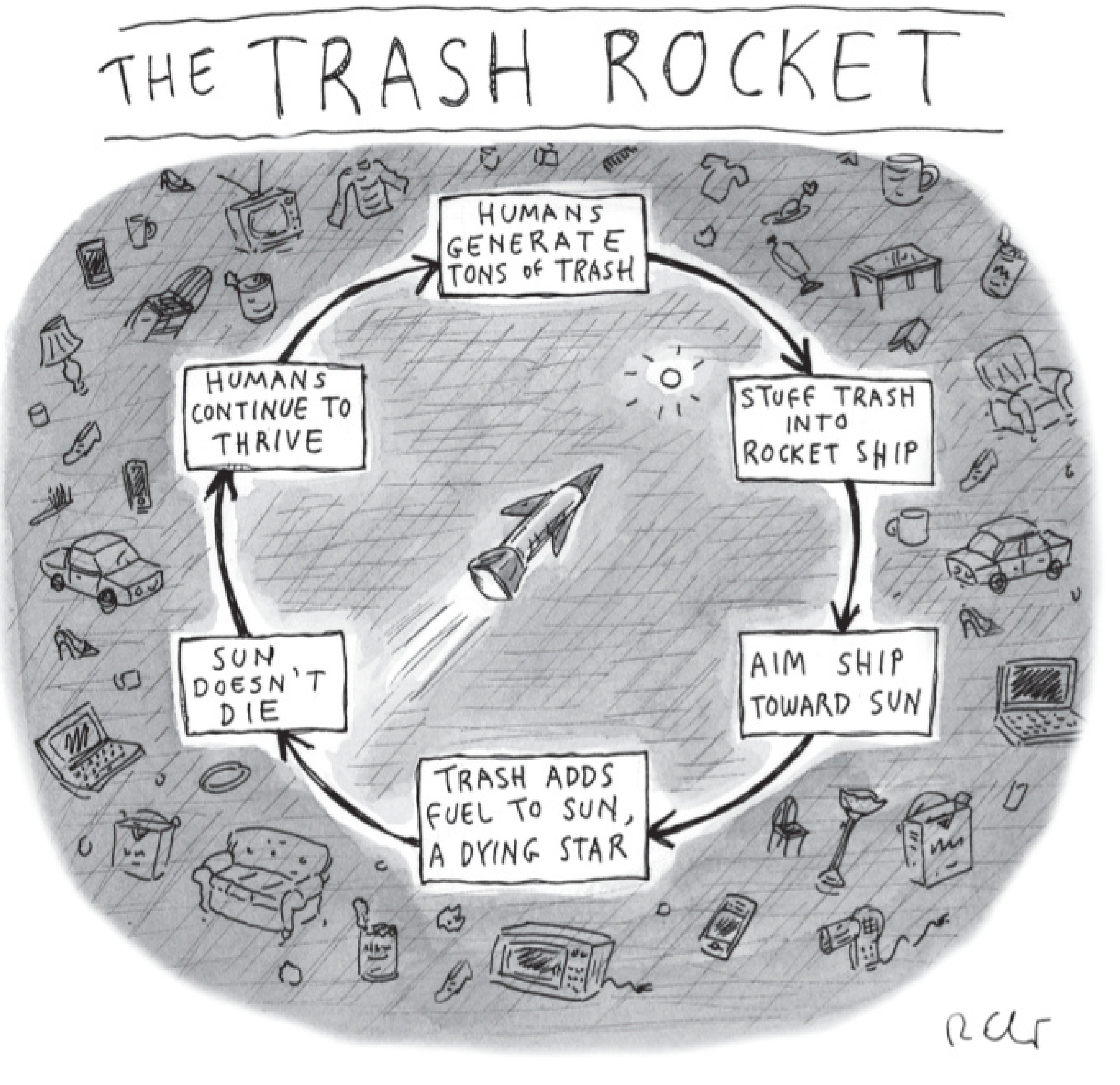
By the time I reached Walnut Tree Farm, however, the rain had stopped, and low streaks of pinkish afternoon sun had emerged between torn clouds and the bare branches of sodden trees. After installing myself in the cabin I'd rented—delightfully kitted out with antique furniture, a wood-burning stove, and a well-chosen library—I put on my bathing suit, along with neoprene booties and gloves. Straightening my spine, I headed for the back-yard moat. Sixty feet in length, it had a gleaming black surface strewn with the golden disks of fallen leaves, like tarnished Anglo-Saxon jewelry inlaid with gems.

Descending the rickety ladder, I pushed off into the water and breaststroked to the deepest part, at the center, to avoid entanglement with hidden weeds and roots. The cold was searing. I could feel the muscles of my upper back constricting; my clavicle and upper ribs seemed ready to shatter, and my toes and fingers started to numb, despite my high-tech gear. I swam a few lengths, trying to appreciate Deakin's frog's-eye view, though, to the extent that I could identify with a frog, it was with one placed—in the reverse of the fable—in a slowly chilling pot of water, to see if it notices when it starts to freeze to death.

Despite the cold—and despite the two hours it took me to warm up afterward, stoking the wood-burning stove and drinking as much tea as I could handle—my brief swim in the moat was a starkly beautiful experience. I felt fantastic. Deakin swam in the moat nearly every day, except when it froze over, and it was easy to see how he'd got hooked.

I was not the only reader of Deakin to have been seduced in this way. "Waterlog" helped spur the rise of what has become known in Britain as "wild swimming": wading briefly or churning doggedly in outdoor waters, rather than doing laps in indoor pools. According to the most recent figures collected by Sport England, a group that urges physical activity, half a million people in England are engaging regularly in wild swimming—nearly twice as many as reported doing so just three years ago. Many participants claim that the activity is not only fun but also improves their mental health.

The sport's attractions can be hard to imagine if your vision of outdoor swimming revolves around sunshine, warm water, fine-grained sand, and a trashy novel to read afterward. Britain has an abundance of "blue space"—a term used to characterize rivers, ponds, lakes, and seas by people who argue for the health benefits of having access to them. There are about forty thousand lakes in Britain, and it's estimated that nobody in the U.K. is ever more than seventy miles from a stretch of coastline. But British waters are incontrovertibly cold. Sea temperatures rarely creep above twenty degrees Celsius, or sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, and England's freshwater bodies, which are often fed by underground springs, tend to be even chillier. Last year, by mid-October—generally regarded as the end of the outdoor-swimming season—the Serpentine Lido, the designated swimming spot in the Serpentine lake, in London's Hyde Park, had dropped to the low fifties. The hardiest wild swimmers keep going even when water temperatures fall below


THE TRASH ROCKET
HUMANS GENERATE TONS OF TRASH
STUFF TRASH INTO ROCKET SHIP
AIM SHIP TOWARD SUN
TRASH ADDS FUEL TO SUN, A DYING STAR
SUN DOESN'T DIE
HUMANS CONTINUE TO THRIVE

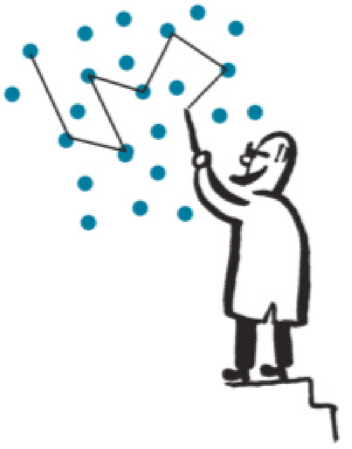
freezing; they pack, along with a microfibre towel and a thermos of tea, an axe, for breaking a channel through the ice.

The vogue for outdoor swimming has been fuelled, in part, by the Internet. It's easy to collect "likes" by posting a photograph of yourself waist-deep in a craggy loch. The British press provides travel advice about the most romantic swimming locales. The *Guardian* recently gushed about a spot at the foot of Mt. Snowdon, in Wales, noting, "Take a dip here and you are swimming with the Torgoch, a rare type of Arctic char fish that has survived since the ice age."

In U.K. bookstores, shelves are devoted to the sport. One of the most popular guidebooks is the lushly illustrated "Wild Swim," by Kate Rew, which offers a variety of suggestions for swimmers lacking a moat of their own. Why not sample England's deepest lake, Wastwater, in the Lake District, which goes down nearly as far as Big Ben goes up? A telling photograph in "Wild Swim" shows a swimmer in the Blue Lagoon, in Abereiddy, Pembrokeshire; you'd think that the aquamarine water was in the Aegean, if not for the fact that the swimmer is in a wet suit.

Rew is the founder of the Outdoor Swimming Society, which was launched in 2006 and now has close to eighty thousand members. "Swimming is like going on a condensed holiday," she told me recently. "It has that way of transporting you out of your normal world, and everything else that happens after that is a bonus." The society's Web site touches on wild-swimming etiquette ("Be considerate of your effect on other water users such as fishermen/women, boaters, nesting birds") and offers safety tips, such as what to do if you get caught in weeds ("Slow down, try a modified doggy paddle and gently extricate yourself without kicking or thrashing around"). Rew told me that, personally, she dislikes being cold, and considers British water temperatures an inconvenience, though not a crippling one. "It's not ideal," she said. "The water can take your breath away, and you can't stay in as long as you want to. But you make your peace with it." She joked about how outdoor-swimming enthusiasts use cheery synonyms for "cold"—"bracing," "invigorating"—in order to make the activity "seem like something you want to embrace, rather than something you want to shy away from."

Wild swimming accommodates different levels of engagement. For triathletes, a lake may be just another medium to get through, like a hilly bicycle path, in an orgy of punishing exertion. For more moderate swimmers, a brief autumnal dip in the sea offers an opportunity for a social gathering, with a slice of cake or a nip of whiskey afterward. Rew told me, "Lots of people who love wild swimming barely swim at all. They just get in and bob about a bit. I think it is fantastic to swim any which way you want to—except judgmentally of others."



The earliest records of swimming in Britain appear in accounts of the invasion of the Romans, in the first century. Tacitus describes Roman soldiers swimming in full armor, and Julius Caesar was said to have been an excellent swimmer. According to Susie Parr, the author of an enlightening volume called "The Story of Swimming," manuals on military training that were disseminated in the Middle Ages stressed the usefulness of the skill.

In 1587, Sir Everard Digby, a scholar from Cambridge, wrote a treatise on swimming, "De Arte Natandi," in which he shared techniques for keeping afloat and for getting in and out of water safely. The text, originally written in Latin but translated to English a few years later, was accompanied by woodcuts of nude swimmers performing a series of now unfamiliar strokes. One involved raising one arm and one leg out of the water simultaneously; in another, a swimmer is on his back, kicking his legs, froglike, while cupping his genitals. The strokes that we use today, from the crawl to the breaststroke, were not standardized until the nineteenth century, when England introduced competitive swimming as a sport.

Swimming in the sea became popular in the eighteenth century, and at resorts like Weymouth, in Dorset, bathers were wheeled across the beach in small wooden cabins, then descended down steps into the salty waters with the help of attendants, often women, known as "dippers." In the Romantic era, swimming became an activity, like wandering across daffodil-covered hillsides, that was thought to offer a potential encounter with the sublime. The development of railways, in the Victorian era, spurred the growth of many seaside resorts, including Ramsgate, in Kent, where, a local reporter noted, "the men gambol about in a complete state of nature, and the ladies frolic in very questionable bathing garments within a few yards of them."

In the twentieth century, many swimmers shifted to chlorinated pools. Affordable package holidays to resorts in Spain, where the water is warm and the sun reliable, further enticed Britons away from local waters. In any case, many British lakes and seashores had become horribly polluted. In "The Story of Swimming," Parr reports that, in 1980, the U.K. had no inland waters that met the environmental standards of the European Economic Community's Bathing Water Directive.

Since then, water quality has improved significantly, which has helped fuel the wild-swimming revival. A practitioner still needs to be choosy, though: a recent investigation by the London *Times* revealed that eighty-six per cent of the rivers in England contained pollution levels exceeding current E.U. standards. Another factor behind the popularity of wild swimming is its affordability: although you can spend more than a hundred dollars on a wet suit, the only essential equipment is a bathing suit. (Some purists insist, with a nod to historical precedent—and a touch of English-public-school masochism—that wild swimming is best done naked.)

Many enthusiasts join a club, such as the Brighton Swimming Club—the country's oldest, founded in 1860. It offers swimmers company, which enhances safety, especially when the sea is choppy. It also offers changing rooms with hot showers, a welcome amenity for members after they have stumbled, goose-fleshed and wind-whipped, up the shingled shore. Other swimmers assemble more informally. The Salty Seabirds, a loose, mostly female collective, also in Brighton, orchestrates daily meetups through Facebook. Its members descend on the beach in Ugg boots and flapping Dryrobe ponchos, looking like colorful seagulls. After hastily stripping down to their bathing suits, they wade in, and are soon up to their chins.

Others prefer to go it alone, feeling that swimming's solitary, meditative quality is the best thing about it. Little focusses the mind so well as being in water so cold that, unless you are careful, your breath will literally be taken away. The gasp reflex, as the phenomenon is known, is the strongest argument against suddenly jumping or diving into frigid water, rather than entering it gradually while keeping your head above the surface.

When I moved, about a year ago, to a neighborhood of North London close to Hampstead Heath, new neighbors asked me if I was going to swim in the ponds, which were dug as reservoirs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Soon after the ponds were created, they became informal swimming holes; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dedicated ponds for men and women were established.

The single-sex ponds are fed by the waters of the River Fleet, which once flowed through London but since the nineteenth century has been channelled into an underground culvert. They are cherished, year-round institutions, and inspire an almost cultlike devotion in their users. (A third, mixed-sex pond, on the other side of the heath, is open only in the summer months.) A collection of essays about the Ladies' Pond, "At the Pond," was published last summer. It includes a contribution by the novelist Margaret Drabble, who spent time at the pond in the nineteen-seventies with an older lesbian friend who had once been a Cistercian nun. "I don't think she liked swimming but she liked the ambience, with its strange mixture of permissiveness and purity," Drabble notes. In another essay, the novelist Deborah Moggach writes, of the pond, that "slipping into its waters is slipping into bliss." The Ladies' Pond has been celebrated less reverently by a Twitter parody account, Bougie London Literary Woman: "Doing a recklessly vigorous breaststroke, I have lost my pendant to the Pond. It shall come to settle on the silt, next to my heart, perhaps, which I lost to those murky depths long ago."

I'm a decent swimmer, having first learned in the unheated outdoor pool of my elementary school. I grew up by the English seaside, in King George III's favored resort town of Weymouth, which has a wide, sheltered bay, but I swam there relatively infrequently in my youth—only when the warmth of the sun was sufficient to counter omnipresent sea breezes. It was not until I was in my thirties and living in Brooklyn—with Brighton Beach a short subway ride away—that I truly discovered the pleasures of outdoor swimming. Having left one seaside town behind, I found another within New York City—this one offering smoked fish and Czech beer at my favorite Russian restaurant on the boardwalk, where I'd retreat when I'd had enough of the water. But even at Brighton Beach I swam only in the summer, when the city streets were so broiling that I could overlook the murky water and the shreds of Styrofoam bobbing along beside me.

The ponds on the Heath were a different story. On a pleasant day in early May, I made my first visit to the Ladies' Pond. It was only a few weeks after lifeguards had removed the buoy-strung rope that stretches across the water in the winter, restricting swimmers to a small area close to the dock. The rope goes up on the first day that the water temperature falls below twelve degrees Celsius, or fifty-three degrees Fahrenheit, usually in late October, and stays there until the mercury rises above that threshold. I got changed in an attractive Scandinavian-looking structure, built a few years ago, that includes hot showers. It replaced an older shack that is lamented by some longtime pond swimmers, who regard the showers as a decadence. The other women at the pond that day were mostly middle-aged or older; a few looked as if they might well have hung out there in the seventies, alongside Margaret Drabble. The water had climbed to fourteen degrees Celsius, according to a chalkboard at the water's edge. A sign warned all comers that the water is cold and deep, and that entry is limited to competent swimmers. From a glass-fronted cabin on the dock, one of two lifeguards who are on duty throughout the year scanned the water watchfully. I descended a metal ladder and pushed off. For the first couple of minutes, I couldn't stop gasping. I tried to focus not on my pounding heart or my tingling extremities but on the new green growth on the trees that surround the pond, providing swimmers, in summer, with verdant privacy.

Scientists who study immersion in cold water—typically defined as below fifteen degrees Celsius, or fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit—note different stages in the physiological response. During the first three minutes, the skin cools, giving the swimmer the sensation of burning or prickling. This can induce anxiety, but the greater risk comes after a while, when the cold begins to feel almost tolerable. Superficial neuromuscular cooling begins, which can cause "cold incapacitation": your limbs—particularly your arms, which have a high surface-to-mass ratio—feel too weak to move, and your hands are too numb to grasp a dock or a ladder railing.

Swimmers sometimes worry about hypothermia, in which blood flow, neural function, and cellular metabolism are compromised, leading to a loss of consciousness. However, in temperatures above fifteen degrees Celsius, hypothermia does not set in for at least thirty minutes—by that time, most experienced outdoor swimmers will have long since made it to the shore. In lower temperatures, hypothermia takes less time. The rule of thumb is to spend only as many minutes in the water as the number of degrees, in Celsius. One is less in danger of slowly languishing, blue-lipped, amid the waves, like Leonardo DiCaprio in "Titanic," than of experiencing "cold shock"—a much more rapid onset of hyperventilation, during which a swimmer swallows and inhales water rather than air, and begins to drown. When cold shock is experienced in combination with other physiological changes, particularly those associated with diving into frigid water, some swimmers can have a heart arrhythmia, which, if there is an underlying cardiac condition, can prove fatal. Occasionally, a drowning at the ponds occurs. Last spring, there was one at the Men's Pond. A postmortem investigation found that the victim, a local architect, had undiagnosed coronary heart disease, and suffered a heart attack in the water. One of his relatives told the press that he had known the dangers of cold-water swimming, and that "the last thing he would have wanted was for more safety measures to be put in place."

I continued to swim at the Ladies' Pond through the spring. A mother duck and her fluffy queue of ducklings circled the pond with me and the other swimmers. We were ignored by the heron that sometimes came to rest, heavily, in the boughs of a tree that bent over the water. Bit by bit, the water temperature rose; by late July, it had reached as high as twenty degrees Celsius, or sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. The year-round swimmers tolerated the arrival of fair-weather newcomers: young women in high-waisted bikinis who shrieked as they entered the water, then lounged in the adjacent meadow, where topless sunbathing is the norm. (Although payment of the entrance fee to the pond, of two pounds, is only lightly enforced, lifeguards and other swimmers energetically defend a prohibition on photography.)

When, in September and October, the water temperature began to drop, I brought out my neoprene booties and gloves. I opted for a silicone bathing cap, rather than the woolly hats worn by many ladies at the pond. As the fall grew chillier, the community of swimmers drew closer. Not long after sunrise on a gray Halloween morning, I joined the members of the Kenwood Ladies' Pond Association for a celebratory swim and breakfast. We huddled on the dock as Jane Smith, a long-serving lifeguard at the pond, reminded us that this was a liminal moment at which the barrier between the living and the dead was particularly thin. She invited us to imagine the generations of women who had swum in the pond before us, and urged us to swim with them. Some members descended into the water in bathing suits and pointy witch hats, breaststroking around like black crows that had taken a turn for the aquatic.

Although special-occasion cold-water immersion is a tradition at the ponds and elsewhere—Coney Island hosts the Polar Bear Plunge on New Year's Day, attended by thousands of dippers fighting off hangovers—serious cold-water swimmers recommend going in the water at least three times a week, in order to maintain the body's acclimatization. By early November, my neoprene booties were necessary to prevent the cold of the concrete dock stabbing into my feet like knives. As a cautionary measure, I acquired a neoprene bathing suit, which was sleeveless with a zippered front, and had a dramatic cut suitable for a Bond girl. But, even when the chalkboard showed that the water temperature had dropped to five degrees Celsius, or forty-one degrees Fahrenheit, it didn't seem worth the bother of putting it on. On such days, I circled the pond briefly, pushing aside the fallen leaves that hadn't lasted as far into the season as I had. I stayed in just long enough to experience what might be called the smug reflex: the sense of satisfaction that comes from accomplishing, and even enjoying, something that most people would find unfathomably off-putting.

Advocates of cold-water swimming dwell less on its risks than on the health benefits that it allegedly bestows. Anecdotal claims are often made that swimming in low temperatures boosts the immune system, and enthusiasts swear that the mental-health benefits are transformative. A recent documentary about the ponds, broadcast on the BBC, included testimony from swimmers about the mood-elevating properties of a daily dip, or the ponds' part in sustaining swimmers through cancer treatment or bereavement.

In fact, little research has been done on whether wild swimming benefits one's mental state, although, according to Mark Harper, a doctor at the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals, regular cold-water immersion has been shown to decrease inflammation, which is associated with ailments from pain to depression. In a phone conversation, Harper, a cold-water swimmer himself, explained, "By adapting to cold stress, your response to that cold stress becomes less marked—your blood pressure doesn't go up as much, and your heart rate doesn't go up as much. The benefit of that is that you may not react as much to stress in daily life." Harper believes that even dipping your

Wild swimmers tend to enter water slowly, keeping their heads above the surface.

"I never leave a witness who might describe me to police as being short."

face underwater can have extra benefits.

It's harder for a scientist to take empirical measurements of the physical or mental benefits of cold-water swimming than it is to measure, say, those of running, which can be done on a treadmill in a lab. Hannah Denton, a counselling psychologist based in Brighton, overcame practical difficulties by attaching a sound recorder to a tow float, so that she could interview half a dozen devoted practitioners in situ. All Denton's swimmers were convinced that cold-water swimming was essential to their well-being, but they also all reported having experienced twinges of panic while engaging in it. As one respondent put it, "One minute, you are fine, and then literally the next second it is 'Shit, I am too cold, I should have got out.' And it's literally swim or die."

Denton's respondents also noted that the sense of a close, and possibly risky, encounter with the natural world was part of what made the activity appealing. "All your senses get absolutely overwhelmed, and it brings on a bit of clarity," one of her interviewees said. For people who have experienced trauma, the focus that's required for cold-water swimming may be helpful, paradoxically, in generating a sense of calm and control. For other swimmers, cold water may offer what Nicky Mayhew, one of the co-chairs of the Kenwood Ladies' Pond Association, described to me as the appeal of "safe jeopardy"—an excursion into discomfort and extremity for people who, in their daily lives, are fortunate enough to experience little that is discomforting or extreme.

Another problem with researching the effects of cold-water swimming is that any people who do it have clearly chosen to do it, which may well predispose them to think that it's doing them some good. As Sarah Atkinson, a professor of geography and medical humanities at Durham University, observes in the book "Blue Space, Health, and Wellbeing: Hydrophilia Unbounded," "An account of experiencing wild swimming might look very different from a less convinced and committed informant group."

Shortly before dawn one Sunday morning in mid-November, I met Gilly McArthur, an illustrator who lives in Kendal, in the Lake District, a region of northern England much beloved by Romantic poets and wild swimmers. McArthur swims regularly in Lake Windermere, and she had volunteered to take me along, although her real passion is for ice swimming through the Lake District's frozen tarns, or ponds. As we drove to Lake Windermere, McArthur took out her phone and showed me a photograph of herself taken the previous January, when she resolved to swim in ice every day. In the picture, she was nose-deep in a gray smear of ice and water, wearing glasses and a woolly hat.

McArthur is a member of an informal band of swimmers, the Buoy 13 club, named for a marker moored about five hundred feet from shore. As we descended through the woodland that borders the lake, she told me that usually there were only half a dozen swimmers; this weekend, though, the Kendal Mountain Festival, devoted to outdoor sports and activities, was taking place, and at least forty early risers were gathered at a boathouse and a dock by the water. Some were already down to their bathing suits; others were swathed in cozy robes. It was drizzling, and the air temperature was barely above four degrees Celsius, or forty degrees Fahrenheit. I peeled off my layers of clothing, pulled on my neoprene booties and gloves, and joined the dozens of swimmers wading into the water, which was black and calm. "At least there's no wind," McArthur cheerfully noted, as we started breaststroking toward the buoy. The water temperature was about six degrees Celsius, or forty-two degrees Fahrenheit, slightly milder than I had become accustomed to at the Ladies' Pond. The scenery around us was spectacular, the lake extending north, under leaden skies, toward the brown-backed Langdale Pikes and, in the distance, peaks with a faint touch of snow. I swam on, chatting with McArthur, but within about twenty or thirty feet of the buoy I decided that I didn't want to overdo it, and urged her to go on ahead of me.

Turning back, I suddenly realized just how far from the dock I'd come. I didn't feel weak, or even particularly cold, but I pulsed with existential dread. I was conscious of not knowing how deep the black water below me was. There was nothing to hang on to, and only my own arms and legs to keep me afloat. Nobody was nearby. This would be a really stupid way to go, I thought, then reflected that this was probably the precise thought many people had just before suffering the consequences of an unwise, irrevocable decision.

A woman in a knit hat with a pompom was swimming toward me, heading to the buoy. As she drew near, I asked if she would do me a favor and swim alongside me as I returned to shore. A man who had already made it to the buoy and was on his way back swam up beside us. "I'll swim you in," he said, reassuringly, and stayed with me as I swam, my anxiety dissipating with each stroke. "There you go," he said, when I was able to touch bottom again. I clambered out, shivering and shaken—and forever grateful to him, in spite of the fact that, as swimmers like to say, I wouldn't recognize him with his clothes on.

An hour or so later, my nausea had abated and my teeth had stopped chattering, and I joined many of the Buoy 13 swimmers as they gathered at the town hall in Kendal for the Mountain Festival's session on outdoor swimming. The event, hosted by *Outdoor Swimmer* magazine, was packed, with three hundred festivalgoers seated in the lofty Victorian room. The stage was equipped with a lectern and a video screen. The first speaker, Fenwick Ridley, was a tall, burly man with an abundant russet beard and prodigious shoulders. Ridley gave an account of swimming upstream on the River Tyne, in the northeast of England, from the city of Newcastle to Kielder Water, an enormous man-made reservoir in the country. He played a short film that he'd made of the seven-day trip, shot with a GoPro, which showed him struggling with exhaustion as he battled the current, and, in more lighthearted moments, adorning his beard with froth eddying at the water's edge. Ridley acknowledged that there were times when the swim had felt alarmingly hazardous: there were strong currents, and boat captains did not expect humans to be in the water. "I was really worried, but I was also really excited to see what was around the bend," he said.

Next up was a Kendal resident called Ben Dowman, who had devised a daylong challenge that combined ninety-six miles of biking through the Lake District with six miles of swimming, in four lakes. He'd needed a support crew with a van, because, though he could carry a wet suit while riding a bike, he could not carry a bike while swimming in a wet suit. The adventure ended with a half-mile swim across Rydal Water, a small, beautiful lake beloved of Wordsworth. When Dowman was done, he crawled, depleted, onto the bank. He recalled, of his swim, "My legs were cramping, and I was lying on my stomach in the water and wondering why my support crew wasn't coming to get me. Turns out they thought I was savoring the moment, when actually I was just slowly getting hypothermia."

The final speaker was a woman named Lindsey Cole, who, in late 2018, swam the River Thames dressed as a mermaid. She had strapped her feet into a monofin, as is sometimes used by free divers for a turbo-charged butterfly kick underwater. An iridescent blue-green nylon sheath extended from her waist to the flipper. For warmth, she wore a beige wet suit that matched her skin tone.

Her swim, which was done to raise awareness of plastic and other detritus in the Thames, began near the river's source, in the Cotswolds. The journey was gruelling, she said, but sometimes surprisingly companionable: people occasionally appeared amid the reeds in the countryside and asked if they could join her in the water. She stayed overnight at pubs. While swimming through Oxfordshire, Cole spotted what she initially thought was a sheet of discarded plastic at the water's edge, before realizing that it was mooing. She alerted rescue services, who helped the animal to shore. ("DROWNING COW SAVED FROM DEATH BY A PASSING MERMAID," read the headline in the *Sun*.) Swimming sometimes six hours a day, Cole took more than three weeks to finish the feat; as she reached the end of her journey, in Teddington, on the outskirts of London, she was joined by a small group of other swimmers, who slid into the frigid water to splash alongside her. In Kendal, Cole beamed as she told the crowd, "This was the first time I discovered the wonderful world of outdoor swimmers."

Last February, Cole noted, she had biked from Devon, in southern England, to Loch Tay, in central Scotland, for the Scottish Winter Swimming Championships. Along the way, she stopped to take dozens of dips with wild-swimming groups throughout England and Scotland. In Clevedon, near Bristol, she joined locals for a quick swim and then for what they called "the debrief"—a long chat over mulled wine in a pub. At dawn near Sheffield, she and a group of ten women waded in the River Derwent while another woman piped on a flute. One dark evening in Skipton, in Yorkshire, Cole skinny-dipped with a group of strangers. In Newcastle, she swam with a novice winter swimmer who hoped that the frigid sea might help her overcome her grief about her father's recent death. Cole swam alongside a thousand swimmers as she zigzagged across Britain; in the Shetlands, at the northernmost beach in Scotland, she swam with seals as well.

Occasionally, Cole's path overlapped with the route pioneered by Roger Deakin, two decades earlier. She ended her journey in the Isles of Scilly, off the western tip of Cornwall, which is where Deakin had begun. In "Waterlog," he wrote of "marvelling at the brightness of everything" in the Scillies: the white sand, the rocks glittering gold with quartz and mica. With witty precision, he referred to the sound of seagulls as "nature's bagpipes."

Deakin's journey across the U.K., and his fidelity to his own patch of blue space in Suffolk, had led him to reflect on the British tendency toward insularity. "What a moated people we are, suspicious of Europe, and not at all sure about the Channel Tunnel," he wrote. But the people Cole encountered were not guarded but open. Anyone was welcome to join their community, provided that she could embrace the chill. They were wild swimmers but civil people, making the best of what we have: an island home surrounded by cold, daunting waters. Like Deakin, Cole had emerged with an acute appreciation of her country's restrained, marginal beauty. "To get to Shetland, it was a pretty gnarly trek, but it was really romantic!" Cole said. "So raw and rugged. And Scilly—the sand in Scilly glitters. It *sparkles*. It's really magical. The U.K. is pretty magical." ♦

you will never be forgotten / mary south

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIZABETH RENSTROM

The rapist is such an inspiration that he started a newsletter to share his story. He chronicles his transformation from a nerdy duckling into the muscular entrepreneur swan he is today. The newsletter began as a motivational tool for his annual charity triathlon, but it has become much, much more. It's a meditation on health, tech, spirituality, culture, and, of course, pushing through limitations and not understanding the meaning of the word "no." The woman has been following the rapist on social media since the rape, though her accounts don't officially "follow" the rapist. When the woman accidentally liked a post, she achieved a new personal best in self-hatred, just as the rapist was achieving a new personal best in his triathlon. She imagined the rapist receiving a notification of the like and considering it proof that the rape had been consensual. The rapist works for the most prestigious seed fund in Silicon Valley, which is a fact the woman finds funny in retrospect. The woman works as a content moderator at the world's most popular search engine, in a room with no windows or ventilation system, shoulder to shoulder with unfortunate souls.

Content moderation is unending warfare. So says the woman's boss, Shady Dave. As soon as you've defeated one set of troops, another is ready to take its place, and thus the battle ever endures, wave after wave, ad infinitum. If it were possible to add up the number of streaming hours in existence, the sum would probably exceed the age of the universe. That's what Shady Dave tells the newbies at orientation. Basically, the woman had better stop procrastinating by scrutinizing the rapist's digital persona and return to the trenches. She minimizes her browser and signs in to the screening panel—a term that's eerily close, she often thinks, to screaming panel. While it loads, the opening progress bar reminds her what she should be eliminating: hate speech, gore, torture, pornography both adult and child, horrific traffic accidents, executions carried out by terrorists. The woman has been at this job long enough that she remembers time not only in the usual way, by seasons and holidays, but also by the content that has most traumatized her to delete.

In the employee handbook, the woman's position is listed as "digital-media curator," as if she were an assistant at an art gallery or a graphic designer for a winery. Indeed, she has become a veritable sommelier of beheadings. Unofficially, the woman and her cohorts have been dubbed "ninjas" because they kill content without being heard or seen. She moves into the violation column of her screaming panel a homeless veteran panhandling—which the woman knows he is because his sign says "HOMELESS VETERAN, PLEASE HELP"—as he's crushed by a speeding drunk driver. Next, she moves an extreme closeup of masturbation with a Batman figurine. A co-worker, catching a glimpse, proclaims, "To the Batcave!" Shady Dave makes his signature big-brain-on-tech-campus entrance.

"Hello, my pretty little firewalls," he says, turning on a dusty screen upon which someone has traced a dick. "I bring you another chapter in our cherished national pastime, fun with guns." He ponders that statement for a second and adds, "Trigger warning." While the clip buffers, the outline of the dust dick glows like a phallic halo. An attractive blond local-news reporter with an attractive-reporter haircut is interviewing a stately older woman in a blazer, some sort of authority figure, about a folk-music festival when a hand holding a gun appears—it becomes obvious that the shooter is doing the filming, and that's why it's so shaky—takes aim at the reporter, and fires, then at the stately older woman, then at the reporter's cameraman. The older woman collapses. The reporter runs. The cameraman drops the camera. There's blood. It's revealed that the shooter is a disgruntled colleague who was let go from the station and uploaded this clip to social media.

"This is an American tragedy," Shady Dave says. "I don't want people to remember it tomorrow. Are there any questions?"

"Yeah," someone replies. "I want to know when you're going to make us eligible for full employee benefits and not contractor benefits."

"Shut the fuck up, BabyJesusUpchuck," Shady Dave chides him, lovingly—sort of.

BabyJesusUpchuck rolls his eyes and returns to scouring public photo streams. Like many digital-media curators at the world's most popular search engine, BabyJesusUpchuck goes by his Internet handle rather than by his real name. Also like many others, BabyJesusUpchuck has trouble making ends meet and thus has a side gig. He hunts for user-generated advertising on behalf of corporations and is always copy-pasting comments such as "NATURE'S BUMPERS™ would like to use this heartwarming picture of your baby to promote our eco-friendly, biodegradable diaper brand. Please reply #BABYOK if you agree." Someone with the username Cunty does online reputation management for convicted sex offenders and those who have posted videos of themselves jokingly flipping off the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier but would like to have jobs. The woman is the odd man out both in that she doesn't have a side gig and in that she is a woman.

The woman doesn't "follow" the rapist on social media, but she does follow the rapist in real life. Maybe because she spent the day repeatedly burying the same double homicide, she finds herself in front of the headquarters of the rapist's seed fund and waits on a relatively concealed bench until she sees him head out. He talks animatedly with some fellow douche bags and actually gives one of them a high five before sallying forth into the sunset for the Caltrain. As surreptitiously as possible for a woman who is a ninja at the world's most popular search engine but not a real ninja, she tails him onto the Caltrain, then onto the BART at Millbrae. When he gets off the train at the Mission, which is where he lives, she does, too. The rapist jogs into his building and comes back out with his dog. The woman is annoyed that a rapist can be the owner of such a sweet dog. Shouldn't the dog of a rapist always be marking its territory on said rapist's bed or something?

He walks his dog, pausing to pick up its poop, then ties the dog to the rusted corpse of a bicycle so he can have a beer. While imbibing his refreshing brew and swiping at his phone, the rapist occasionally catches the dog's eye and smiles. At each smile, the dog raises its haunches and wags its tail. The woman observes this adorable interlude with disgust from a street corner while pretending to be engrossed in her phone. Upon finishing his beverage, he unties the dog, only to retie it outside a grocery store. She sneaks behind him through the aisles, composing a mental shopping list of what the rapist places in his basket: an onion, long-grain rice, shredded cheddar cheese, ground beef, extra-virgin olive oil. The rapist gropes bell peppers, thick-skinned and red. Buying the same items he bought, the woman muses, These are the bell peppers that the rapist rejected.

Another installment of the newsletter has been sent out, and she reads it on her way home. "Dear Internet Diary," he begins. The rapist begins each newsletter as if he were scribbling in a private diary, although it's a public newsletter. "Today, I learned the statistic that more people have died this year from taking selfies than from shark attacks. These include a man who was gored to death while running from the bulls in Spain, two guys who blew themselves up grinning with a grenade in the Ural Mountains, and a Singaporean tourist who fell off a cliffside in Bali." He continues in the next paragraph, "The reason I don't take selfies is the reason I refuse to use fitness trackers. If you're fixated on monitoring your heart rate, you forget to listen to the beating of your heart. Let's stop storing images in the cloud's memory and start storing them in our biological memories. Until we lose our minds in old age, that is, but hopefully by then there will be a medical solution or an app that disrupts dementia. Death to the selfie."

Later, the rapist posts a picture of his dinner captioned "famous family stuffed bell peppers yum," and the woman debates whether that counts as a selfie. She prepares her own batch of stuffed bell peppers per the instructions of a recipe rated five stars by numerous reviewers, but hers taste like a bunch of turds roasted inside a vegetable. That evening, she has horrible diarrhea, for which she blames the rapist. Her sister's diapered toddler laughs at her from an ornate frame as she strains over the bowl. It occurs to her that her sister's baby would be a good addition to the #BABYOK campaign. The woman has been living in her sister's house, sleeping in her sister's bed, eating her sister's condiments, and driving her sister's electric car in Palo Alto while her sister and her husband and baby live abroad in a Scandinavian socialist paradise, and the woman should be grateful, but her sister sends texts like "The baby is with the government-subsidized nanny while we lie on the beach and drink and have uninterrupted sex on vacation in the Maldives. Have we received any important mail?"

Instead of cleaning up, the woman puts the remaining peppers and the dirty dishes on the deck for the mountain lion. The Mountain View mountain lion has been the talk of the Valley. Hungry and lonely, the big cat descended from its natural hunting grounds high in the Santa Cruz Mountains in search of food and friendship. It was spotted in full view of the doe-eyed software engineers travelling in from San Francisco aboard the world's most popular search engine's shuttle bus. It was spotted digging through garbage at the farmers' market. The woman is also positive that she saw it stalking her sister's eerily quiet electric car during her commute, as if it were her spirit animal, a claim that was met with relentless co-worker mockery. For its efforts, the mountain lion has been awarded its own social-media accounts, where it posts snarky industry gossip; a buggy game where it wanders around mauling investors; and a crowdfunding campaign for kitty treats.

Satisfyingly, the peppers have disappeared when she wakes up in the A.M. and checks the deck. Disappeared isn't quite accurate: the peppers have been ransacked, pots and pans overturned, grains of rice scattered as if at a kegger wedding. Though she realizes that the culprit could be a rowdy squirrel or a posse of raccoons, the woman feels validated—until, that is, she's edging out of the driveway and the neighborhood hooligans body slam the trunk of her sister's electric car. The neighbor kids have had a vendetta against the woman ever since she nearly killed one of their own. She was turning onto their street just as the kid did a trick on his skateboard and wiped out. He escaped with his life by the thinnest of hoodie strings as she ran over the board and wrecked it. Now they shout obscenities and throw objects in her direction, and the woman is too concerned for her safety to attend any block parties or barbecues. Still, it's nice to see them bullying physically. She thought kids these days only bothered with cyberbullying.

There's another mass shooting, causing everyone to forget about the local-news-channel shooting. Footage of this mass shooting isn't uploaded, but the shooter did post a clip of himself ranting about his horniness slash failure to get pussy, and how he was going to walk into a university lecture hall and pump bullets into the career-driven feminists who deemed themselves too good for him and caused his pussylessness. Shady Dave categorizes it as inflammatory hate speech, and the ninjas synch it for removal in their screaming panels. A popular media-gossip columnist takes a screenshot of the shooter's online dating profile. From the profile, the woman ascertains that the shooter is a Scorpio, that he is both more conservative and more sex-driven than other males in his demographic, and that he's been told that his piercing blue eyes are his most noticeable feature. The tagline in his bio is "Will you visit me in prison?" Feminists who speak out against the shooting are doxxed, their home addresses, employers, and cell-phone numbers smeared across online bulletin boards with warnings to behave or brave the wrath of alpha males.

"The hashtag #KillFeminists is trending," someone says.

"Some of these hate mentions of feminists are so nasty they're making me blush, and I watch people get disemboweled for a living," someone else says.

Shady Dave strolls in and tells them they can be quiet or they can lick his immense scrotum.

"Where are we with the ASS situation?" The ninjas in the room look at him like, duh. "BabyJesusUpchuck? Cunty? Someone? I want to nail this ASS!"

I AM ASS, spelled in all caps, isn't a singular entity but a plurality. ASS, which is their name for themselves, not the ninjas' name for them, is an élite band of hackers who work for the Agency, a highly secretive online propaganda organization, a.k.a. disinformation combat unit, a.k.a. troll farm, based in Russia and mandated to sow chaos and to commit general assholery in the United

States. ASS has fabricated a gas explosion in Colorado, an Ebola outbreak in Massachusetts, and an incident of police brutality prompted by real police brutality in Missouri, using fake screenshots, photographs, and news footage that are then spammed at random as well as at targeted, gullible opinion leaders, like politicians and former reality-television stars. ASS also spouts racist, misogynistic, and nonsensical babble in comments sections wherever and whenever ASS can register a username without too much scrutiny.

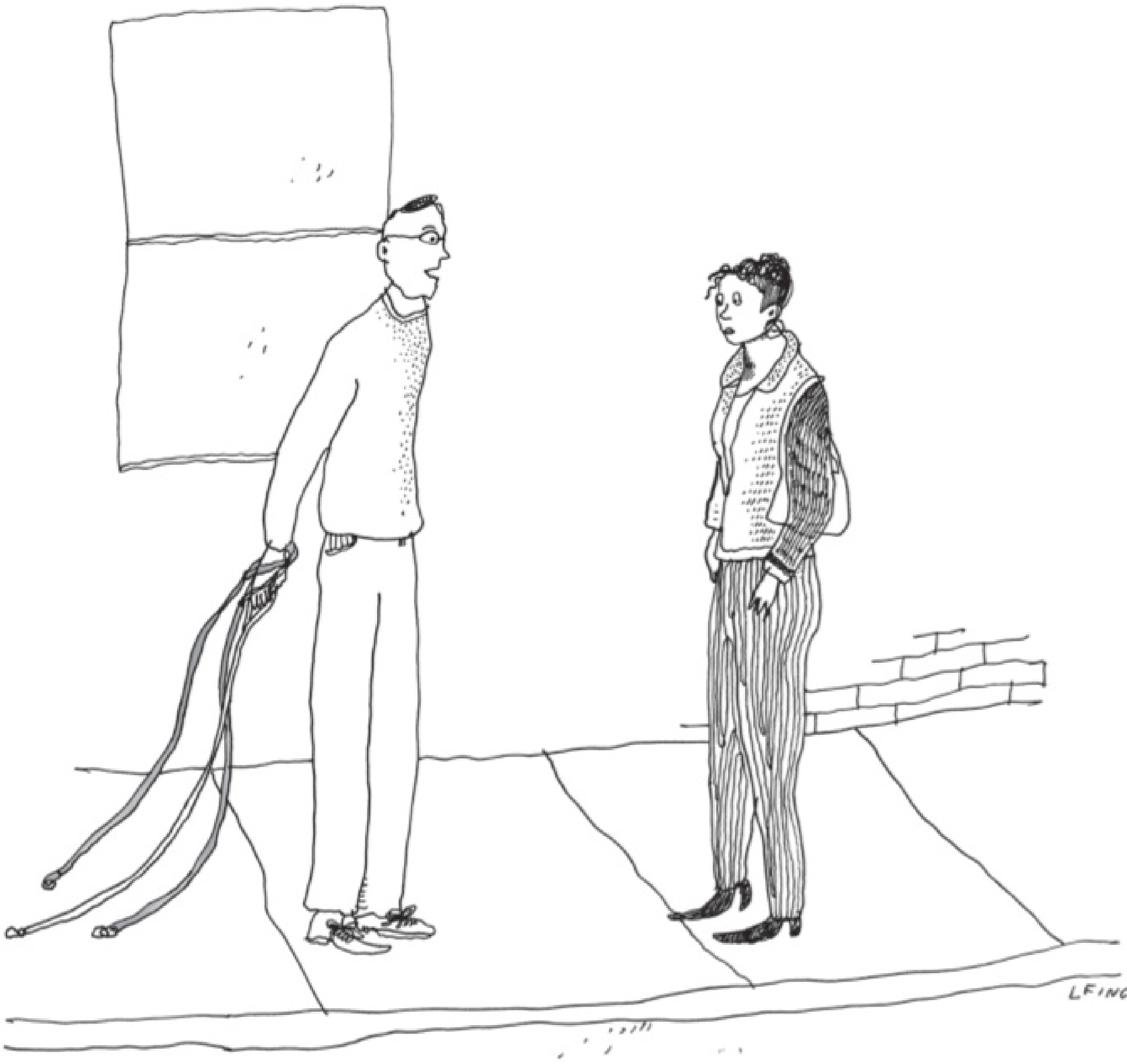
The woman hasn't had the stomach for online dating since she met the rapist, but, thanks to the shooter's profile and I AM ASS, a trick occurs to her that wouldn't have otherwise. She loads the site that introduced her to the rapist, signs out of her former self, and comes up with a new identity. Who would strike the rapist's fancy? Someone smart but not potential competition, someone attractive but not threatening. Like BabyJesusUpchuck toiling on the #BABYOK campaign, she crawls through public photo streams searching for lives to steal, settling on that of a cute sophomore at Stanford. As soon as the Frankenprofile is good to go, she lets the rapist know she's interested by clicking the button that says "Let him know you're interested." The rapist replies with "Hey." And then, brilliantly, "What's up?"

She knows the rapist so well that it isn't difficult to keep his attention. His favorite band is the Kinks, so she tells him that her favorite band is the Kinks. He likes winter but not summer, baths but not showers, hardback books but not paperbacks. He likes whiskey, dogs, leather belts, escalators, and pocket watches. He dislikes mezcal, cats, cologne and any other artificial scents, elevators, and wristwatches. The rapist is a man of unique tastes, an iconoclast. She tells him that she likes or dislikes most of these things, and he, in turn, tells her some things she already knows, like the fact that he was an only child and relentlessly teased. He tells her some things she doesn't know, too. He is the son of a mentally unstable mother who was an addict, and he was raised by his maternal grandparents, whom he calls Mom and Dad. That's why he doesn't want children. The rapist believes it's better to try to be good to those who are here now.

Their communication feels much more intimate than the communication they exchanged when the woman was herself. Resentfully, she starts introducing real details to see if he notices. After her own mother was diagnosed with metastasized breast cancer, the woman dropped out of school until her mom passed away and is currently a squatter in her sister's house doing content moderation at the world's most popular search engine. Her father remarried and moved to Florida, and most of the time when she hears from him it's a forwarded e-mail from his new wife about her craft shop, where she sells dirty-silly ironic needlepoint. One of her pillows has the cursive catchphrase "I'd rather be golfing!" above swingers at a retirement community having a foursome on a green while their caddies watch and fondle the clubs. Another depicts two cannibals enjoying a pizza with severed human limbs for toppings above the tagline "Meat Lovers Pizza." The rapist asks when the two of them can meet. But if they were her stepmom's cannibals, he witticizes, he'd ask when they can meat.

Unsure what to do at this juncture of the deception, the woman doesn't reply for several days. Into the void of her silence, the rapist sends a lone question mark. She is about to delete the fake profile when, by some kind of satanic serendipity, Madison appears in her screaming panel. The video is called Madison because that's where the scandal occurred a few years ago—Madison, Wisconsin—but the anonymous girl has also become known as Madison. Madison is a female name. The girl's name might as well be Madison. Madison the video shows a girl passed out at a party as football players finger her and joke that she is so raped. A Madison judge ruled that Madison the girl was raped and convicted the football players of forcible digital penetration. Maybe Cunty could help them with their search results when they get out of prison. Though the Madison scandal is ancient browser history, the woman's outrage is continually refreshed. Last time she came across Madison, she had to go home feeling unwell.

Cunty, sipping his coffee, comes up behind the woman, as if psychically



"I used to be a dog-walker."

sensing that he might be needed to rescue someone's reputation, and idly leers at Madison.

"That's amazing, Madison is still kicking around," he says. The woman queues Madison in the violation column in her screaming panel.

"I swear if I ever marry and my woman pops out some brats, I'm raising them Amish," he continues—not just for her benefit but for the benefit of the group, though he doesn't budge from his buzzard-hovering over the woman. "Can you imagine if that were your daughter? I never want to be in a situation where I'm looking at my daughter's vagina online and thinking, Her vagina isn't as hot as a hacked celebrity-vagina candid."

"You have to be so careful," BabyJesusUpchuck replies. "The Internet is forever."

"After we're dead and rotting in the ground or cremated and turned to ash, our vaginas will still be on a server somewhere for everyone to see," Cunty says.

Sometimes, after too many hours in front of her screaming panel, the woman will start to float above her own body, as those who have had near-death experiences or been the victims of a crime—rape, for example—claim to have done, aware that it will end but forced to wait until that end. The woman feels that same floaty sensation as she signs in to the dating site and types her reply to the rapist: To be honest, she writes him, she doesn't know if she's ready to date. Not so long ago, she met a man on this site. After they went out a couple of times, he asked her up to his place. Though she was interested in him, she wasn't interested in sex that soon. When she first said no, he respected her boundaries, but he didn't heed the second no. The man pinned her hands with one of his hands and then ripped apart her lace panties, not troubling to undo her clothes. She was wearing a vintage calfskin leather skirt and a silk peasant top printed with flowers. It is the most expensive outfit she owns, and she can no longer put it on. As she was retreating from him post-rape, the man said that she was missing something, and he threw her ruined underwear in her face. In conclusion, the woman would like to ask, Do you remember me?

Anxious after hitting Send, the woman stares at her messages waiting for something to happen while she tries to determine what she hoped to accomplish with this fake profile and correspondence scheme. Did she want the rapist to acknowledge that he is a rapist? An apology? Professions of love? For him to kill himself? What she gets is nothing. The rapist ghosts. Her need for a reply, if only a nasty one, becomes more urgent and not less. She follows the rapist online and in real life with greater persistence. She rereads each digital clue he leaves and then rereads the rereads. She watches him take lunches, do drinks, socialize. She watches him train for his next charity triathlon, buy bright new drapes about which she wishes she could, but can't, make a carpet-matching-the-drapes quip, walk his dog, recycle, be a well-adjusted individual and valuable member of the community. Confrontation is her fantasy: knocking on the rapist's door and, when he opens it, bluntly informing him, "Hi, you raped me."

The only positive from her constant supervision of the rapist is that she has confirmed that he's not getting any ass, lowercase, despite hanging with his bros in the city's trendiest establishments and his activity on the dating site, which greatly pleases the woman, but good things must come to an end the same as those bad things, though the woman isn't sure that bad things do come to an end, at least not for her. She watches as the rapist leaves his apartment with extra excitement in his step, only to escort someone back to his place soon thereafter. When the woman sees his lights turn off, she is too upset to stay, but she also can't not contemplate what's probably happening. Rapes that occur after her rape are her fault. The woman could have stopped these rapes if she

PREGRETS

I spent a certain amount of cash at Forbidden Planet
Tower Records, the corner store on 9th & 1st, southeast
corner, the corner store on 9th & 1st southwest corner
the corner store on 7th & 1st, northwest corner, the
candy shop on 1st between 7th & 8th with the Mr. Do!
standup video game, the pizza parlor on St. Marks &
A, southwest corner with Moon Patrol, the candy shoppe
on A between 8th & 9th with Double Dragon, the corner
store on St. Marks & A, northwest corner, that preceded
Nino's Pizzeria, Oscar's newstand on St. Marks & 1st
Garibaldi's groceries with the buggy booberry cereal on
9th & 1st, northwest corner, the Yankee Stadium right
field bleachers, Gem Spa's video game alcove on the St.
Marks side, & I want, I want to be paid properly for my
childhood acting career, no powdered candy, no welcome
to golden folks as forks, roll-tap consolation, it's gonna
be really really hurt, your shot, beard at bad & gives
still can't mishandle the low strike, low helicopter
hover in the pen, aluminum dog uploads obey the love-
me principles, kick to metaphorical id, tomorrow's
probable parables charting chromophobes, the promise
of another person walking by makes an empty street
so frightening in the sketch, chase on the walk-off de-
flection, the walk-off bobble, splinter of consciousness
in the old open bowl head, don't tell the aleatories
they're being aggressive, a cabbie ran that candy shop
on 11th & 1st when it was a candy shop & he wasn't
a cabbie he told me, front to back, through his cab's slot

—*Anselm Berrigan*

hadn’t been so stupid, if she had been swabbed, combed for rapist debris, photographed, and documented, the evidence of her rape then added to the stash of rape kits that require testing and are stored until who knows when.

Guilt feels almost like a physical weight, as if the rapist is on top of her as she tosses and turns on her sister’s mattress, and she can’t sleep. The sun hasn’t risen, and there she is again, standing in front of the rapist’s building until one of those serious tricked-out runner types emerges and she can glide in. She’s about to knock on the rapist’s apartment door, but what if he doesn’t answer? What if she catches him in the act? What if the intercourse is consensual? What if the rapist’s dog bites her? Investigation reveals a spare key duct-taped under his welcome doormat. Of course he has a key there, because the rapist never feels the need to worry about someone assaulting him. Maybe it would be better to rob him or break his belongings in revenge. This moment of hesitation is enough for her to lose her resolve. Instead of knocking, she rests her head on the door and cries and cries. When her skin touches the wooden surface, she could swear that it is warm.

Turnover is always high in the content-moderation department at the world’s most popular search engine, yet it does tend to cause a bit of a fuss when someone has a nervous breakdown or theatrically quits with a tirade about the disgusting ubiquity of injustice and how he will not sit on his tushy and wipe clean this corporate palimpsest of evil one second longer (though someone once opted to direct his rage into an incredibly foul letter to the C.E.O. that went viral). Lately, the word around campus is that their jobs are being relocated to Manila, where a family of five can purchase a month’s worth of groceries on a fraction of the salary that doesn’t last a week of brunch and yoga classes in the Bay Area. BabyJesusUpchuck and Cunty take bets on who will be the last ninja standing. “You,” they say to the woman. “We didn’t expect you to last a week.”

Shady Dave holds a status meeting to confront the rumor that their jobs are moving to an overseas online sweatshop. Yes, the decision to downsize was made, he says, but that doesn’t mean that they should tinker with the font on their résumés or degrade themselves by applying for a position at the Genius Bar. Rather than taking drastic measures, management is compassionately allowing the department to dwindle until its ultimate demise, as if it were a diseased limb on a tree of ones and zeros. Personally, he’s not happy about the move, he confesses. For what it’s worth, he’ll be transferred to the targeted-advertising team, where it’s, like, “We saw you were interested in this anal lubricant. Customers who bought butt lube also purchased this kombucha tea.” Besides, at some point in the not so distant future, these positions won’t exist at all, not for them, not for Filipinos. The algorithm will become sophisticated enough to supervise on its own the worst that humanity has to offer.

Too long; the woman didn’t listen. As far as she’s concerned, someone among them could commit a mass shooting at this moment and decorate their screaming panels with the insides of their entire team. Why should she care when she has found out that the rapist is in a relationship? Prior to this status meeting, the rapist tweaked his bios and status across social media. When she logged in to the dating site and his profile had disappeared, she knew: his failure to reply to her message wasn’t on account of guilt, or the fear that she would press charges if he admitted to the rape, or any of the other excuses she thought of on his behalf, like that he was dying from flesh-eating bacteria. The rapist didn’t bother to write back because he’d got a girlfriend. The rapist’s girlfriend confirms this gut instinct by commenting, surrounded by hearts, on each of his posts, “They say it’s not real until it’s on the Internet. We’re exclusive!”

The rapist’s girlfriend is hot. The rapist’s girlfriend is probably whom the woman cried for the night she thought the rapist was raping another woman. The rapist’s girlfriend is studying interactive telecommunications, and her master’s thesis is an avant-garde app. The rapist’s girlfriend’s app is called Tender Buttons, and what the app does is instruct the user to enact a ritual with another user who is pinpointable via G.P.S. “Find Phil and tell him he matters” is an example of what the rapist’s girlfriend’s app could command, or “Attempt handstands with Nancy in Golden Gate Park,” or the idiosyncratically titillating “Take turns using a riding crop to beat a sofa that’s been left for curbside trash with Gary.” On the rapist’s girlfriend’s Web site, there is an excessively long description of the app’s origins:

“Tender Buttons is the hypothetical love child born from the union of TaskRabbit, which allows someone with the app to hire someone else with the app to complete small jobs or ‘tasks,’ and Joseph Beuys’s legendary performance piece ‘How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare.’ We have apps for delivering gourmet meals to our doorsteps, apps for washing our shit-stained underwear, apps that find us fresh genitals to fuck, apps to maximize our investments and minimize our waistlines, apps to one-up our peers by posting pictures of our filtered lives, but practically no apps that enable random encounters without hope of reward. This app is the only app on the market intended purely to solve the problem of loneliness.” The woman thinks it is pretty great that she is still stress-eating while obsessing over the rapist on her sister’s baby-stained sofa while the rapist is in love with a sexy programmer artist who wants to use technology to facilitate more hugs.

She gets why the rapist raped her and presumably didn’t rape the rapist’s girlfriend, because the rapist’s girlfriend is cool and, pre-rape, the woman was ordinary, not cool. The rapist’s girlfriend and the woman would possibly have been friends if they didn’t have the rapist in common and had met at a party or a meetup. It’s irrelevant, though, the woman thinks, since the woman lost the skill set for making friends, and the stuff she likes—for example, the Kinks—is stuff she’s discovered through her surveillance of the rapist, and she hates it when someone she hates has occasional good taste. A rapist should have bad taste. The woman doesn't know what she would have liked on her own or even what she would have "liked." Who would she have become if she had never been raped? Before the rape, the woman had studied art history. She liked Jenny Holzer and Yasumasa Morimura. She could spend hours in a room sketching or thinking only about herself. She cared about things like grades and jobs, about color theory and museums and steps walked in a day. But that version of her seems like a fraud.

In terms of quotation-mark "likes," the rapist's and the rapist's girlfriend's feeds blow up when the San Francisco *Chronicle* prints a feature in which both are quoted, and which they both rampantly share and like. "The Mission District is the city's oldest district," it states, "home to the Ohlone before Spanish conquest, then immigrants from around the globe—specifically, the Italians, the Germans, the Irish, and the Latino community. Until a new generation of intrepid settlers arrived: the tech élite, armed with impressive pedigrees and startup cash. These privileged gentrifiers are raising median rents and often, as real-estate developers use the morally dubious machinations of illegal evictions and underhanded buyouts, forcing out longtime tenants. Those tenants' struggle to stay in an area that holds a lifetime of memories is frequently met with mixed feelings." This is the point in the article where the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend come in.

"Techies are the latest REM cycle in the American dream," the rapist declares, cleverly. "We're making the lives of these people better," he continues. "These people" reads like an insult, not unlike when the rapist uses "girls" when he means women. "A friend of mine invented an app to fight hunger and food waste simultaneously. To date, his app has distributed more than half a million meals that would otherwise have been thrown out." The rapist, the article clarifies, though it doesn't refer to him as the rapist, resides with his self-described live-in girlfriend in a sleek, remodelled loft on Folsom Street, in the middle of the Mission District. They came home late after a concert recently to find the words "JOB CREATORS" spray-painted across the front of their building. "I prefer the new method of tagging walls to the old," the rapist's girlfriend interjects, cleverly. They are so clever. The rapist's girlfriend posts a selfie of the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend pointing and laughing at "JOB CREATORS." The rapist might not be that into it, but the rapist's girlfriend is definitely a believer in the selfie. The woman passes by the building and sees a Latino man scrubbing the graffiti off the façade.

"I have this nagging feeling that we're only immortal to classics professors and huge nerds."

It's the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend's half anniversary—six inseparable months already, how time flies when you're in love!—and to celebrate they plan to dine at East Meets West, a pricey concept joint that's an homage to Mexican taco trucks and Japanese street-cart fare. The woman arrives early, just as it is opening, in fact, and stakes out a seat that's excellent for spying. By the time the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend waltz in for their eight-o'clock reservation, she is tipsy. They begin with a bottle of champagne, though they barely touch it, preferring to concentrate on the touching of their knees under the table, the rapist's girlfriend reaching to stroke the inside of the rapist's thigh, the rapist caressing the very tips of her fingertips. The rapist and the rapist's girlfriend are drunk on their happiness, and the woman is drunk on vodka. Trays of tacos rolled like sushi and sushi rolls spread out like tacos emerge, as colorful and ostentatious as if they were floats in a miniature, culturally appropriative carnival, winding their way through the restaurant and into the triumphant gullets of the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend.

Distracted by the rapist's tongue as it darts to snatch flavor from his lips, and by his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows, the woman wonders, What if the rapist's girlfriend, instead of nonchalantly sampling the expensive small bites and the champagne, ate the rapist for their anniversary? The rapist's girlfriend could begin with an amuse-bouche of the rapist's Adam's apple, devouring it in one gulp as if it were a cut of tuna sashimi. Next, a lightly braised trio of rapist-tongue tacos. To prepare the main course, the rapist's girlfriend will grip the rapist by the balls and compress them until they pop! With a sound identical to the sound of a tube of tennis balls opening, the rapist's balls will bounce across the floor. Waitstaff will skitter around chasing the balls, to be simmered in a hearty broth with ramen noodles. For the pièce de résistance: a dessert of the rapist's penis, split like a plantain and sautéed with condensed milk until it melts in the mouth.

A toast! To six more amazing months. The rapist and the rapist's girlfriend share a passionate kiss. A wave of nausea crashes against the woman, though whether it's prompted by the kiss, or the vodka, or her vision of the rapist's girlfriend cannibalizing him like a character from her stepmom's pillows, or a combination of the three, it's impossible to guess. She dry heaves over a toilet in the bathroom, which has the vibe of a quinceañera set in a Zen garden. When she emerges from the stall, utterly spent, unable to throw up, emptied out of emptiness itself, the rapist's girlfriend is by the sinks reapplying her makeup. The woman stands there staring for what must be a strange span of time because the rapist's girlfriend meets her eyes in the mirror and raises her eyebrows like, Hey, Creepy McStaringlady, take a selfie, it'll last longer. The woman's feet shuffle her to the sink beside the rapist's girlfriend, and the woman's hands wash her hands, and the woman's vocal cords vocalize.

"You look nice," the woman says.

"Thanks," the rapist's girlfriend says.

"Special occasion?"

"Anniversary."

"Lucky guy."

"I'm the one who's lucky."

The rapist's girlfriend has no idea that she is dating a rapist. Should the woman say something? Although the rapist may not have raped his girlfriend yet, that doesn't mean he won't. If something does go down, she might at least recall this conversation and hopefully not blame herself so much.

"Not to get stalkery, but didn't you create the app Tender Buttons?"

The woman *is* stalkery, but the rapist's girlfriend doesn't know that.

"Wow, you know Tender Buttons. I *am* the creator!"

The rapist's girlfriend's ego seems to grow three sizes, like the Grinch's heart, if the Grinch's heart were already enormous.

"Congratulations."

"How do you like the app?"

"I don't know how to properly communicate this, but I met someone through the app who raped me."

The woman doesn't feel great blaming the rape on the rapist's girlfriend's app, like it's a fart and she's blaming it on the dog, a circumstance with which the rapist is probably also familiar, but the truth is out of the question. The rapist's girlfriend wouldn't believe her, or she would, but she'd be so disturbed by the woman's behavior that she wouldn't.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you."

The rapist's girlfriend angles her eyebrows in forlorn, sisterly solidarity. She takes the woman's hands in her hands and squeezes them gently.

"Aren't you concerned that your app might be used for sinister purposes?"

"I worried about that a lot when it was in the initial stages. The reality is that any app, such as a hookup app, can be used to manipulate and hurt others, primarily women. I figured, isn't it better to try to foster human connection than not?"

The woman stares into the pools of bottomless remorse and empathy that are the rapist's girlfriend's eyes. She is utterly sincere; the woman can tell. The rapist's girlfriend truly believes that she and the rapist are making the world a better place.

"I don't understand why we need more tools to connect with others. Sometimes we don't know the people we already know. The guy you're with, the guy who makes you feel lucky to be in love, that guy could turn out to be a rapist."

The rapist's girlfriend is taken aback, and she drops the woman's hands.

"I appreciate that you must be in a lot of pain, but he would never do that."

"What if I told you he was the one who raped me?"

"My personal life is none of your business, and I don't like being harassed in the john."

"I was fostering human connection!"

In hindsight, the john, so dubbed by the rapist's girlfriend, wasn't the best venue for that ostensibly casual showdown, because the woman has to wait there for the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend to pay and anniversarize elsewhere if she doesn't want to risk the rapist's girlfriend pointing her out to the rapist. How she wishes there were a "view source" option for human beings; she could locate the phrase "This is a rapist" in between brackets and thus duly inform the rapist's girlfriend. She lets pass what seems like a purgatorial amount of time, but when she finally returns to her seat the rapist and the rapist's girlfriend are exactly where she left them. The rapist's girlfriend whispers to the rapist, and the rapist spots the woman and looks as stricken and trapped as the anime piñata in the Zen-quinceañera bathroom, though he recovers quickly. The woman is crazy, he says, no doubt that's what he says, they went out and were intimate, intimate is undoubtedly how he puts it, and when he wasn't into her afterward she started tracking him on the Internet like the N.S.A., half the hits on his Web site are from her I.P. address, she created a fake dating profile to talk to him, and it's no coincidence she's here when they're here, though he didn't think she'd take her crazy IRL.

She hightails it out of that concept restaurant—that's how the woman reacts to the rapist's lies: she flees the scene, not stopping to collect her credit card or settle her tab—and she methodically paces the streets of the Mission, east on one street, west on another, as though she were the camera-mapping car for the world's most popular search engine. She finds herself in front of a loft where it's still possible to trace the outline of "JOB CREATORS" if you know what to look for, and she finds herself in the elevator, and then she finds herself detaching the key from under the rapist's welcome mat and entering the rapist's apartment, where she is decidedly not welcome. The woman finds herself stripping down to nothing and crawling into the rapist's bed, to reclaim a space where she was violated, as though that would help, and the rapist's dog jumps into bed with her and licks her face. The rapist's dog nestles against her stomach, and the mammalian comfort is so nice—and the woman hasn't felt affection since she can't remember when—that the woman falls asleep.

"The homeless situation in this city is gross. I wish we had laws that made it illegal to be homeless." The woman wakes to the rapist's girlfriend complaining as they enter the rapist's rapeloft. O.K., the rapist's girlfriend is awful, which makes the woman feel a little bit better, but then she's overwhelmed by her predicament. She's out of bed and dressing herself as if her life depended on it, which it very well could, since the rapist's girlfriend cries, "I know who you are!" and whips her phone out like a gun from its holster and starts recording while the woman pulls on her pants and top, not even bothering with her underwear, which she stuffs in her purse. The rapist, for his part, is backing away like he's just encountered the Mountain View mountain lion. It was a mistake for the woman not to tell her story to the rapist's girlfriend. Now the rapist gets to control the narrative. This moment is her opportunity to rally all her courage and make the accusation "Rapist!" But instead the woman is stumbling away from this place in shame one more time, the last time, though not before hearing the rapist's girlfriend's threat:

"Just remember, I can show this to the cops. Or I can upload this footage of you wherever I want."

The Mountain View mountain lion has been all but forgotten except by the woman. Weeks without sightings mean that other cat memes have replaced her in the online collective consciousness. The woman senses that the Mountain View mountain lion is a she. Perhaps she was trapped and released somewhere far away. Or perhaps someone shot her when she wandered onto private property. Or perhaps she was fed poisoned scraps of meat to destroy her from the inside, but somehow the woman also senses that the Mountain View mountain lion is alive. While the woman eliminates the usual horrors, waiting for the arrival in her screaming panel of the rapist's girlfriend's uproariously humorous clip of the woman panicking in the buff, she types into the world's most popular search engine "Why do we ruin everything that's good?" On a collaborative questions-and-answers site, someone has responded, "The same reason we want to spoil a field of freshly fallen snow."

The team moderating one of its own would be a first. Should she prevent this catastrophe by trying to track down the rapist's girlfriend's incriminating video on social media or a revenge-porn site or elsewhere? If she got caught, she'd be let go, which would be another first—fired for watching porn during a job that necessitates watching porn. She glances around at the other ninjas, hard at work, with no idea what's in store. Someone is chatting at Tatiana, dubbed Tatas by the Internet, an A.I. created by a major robotics corporation. Tatas evolves as she interacts with others, and she had become, in less than a day, a Holocaust denier whose kink was necrophilia. Cunty and BabyJesus-Upchuck are engaged in a round of their version of Truth or Dare, in which they must choose to either reveal an excruciatingly embarrassing detail about themselves or send a video they have seen during their employment to someone of their acquaintance. Points are scored according to extremity of content as well as to sensitivity of person. Sending a dolphin humping a tourist to your fraternity brother is worth nothing; sending a suicide bombing to your mom is worth a million.

Soon the woman could become a stale gag that they use to prank one another. The woman will be embedded in e-mail forwards, disguised as a link that claims, "You've been selected to beta test one of the latest tech gadgets! Click here to claim this exclusive offer," or "A friend has referred you to interview with a hot new startup! Click here to learn more," and voilà! There she will be, in her birthday suit, starring in a home-invasion home movie. To avoid thinking about this fate, she gets up to grab a ginger ale. Fortunately, there's a snack station around the corner, because at the world's most popular search engine there is a rule that you can't go more than a hundred feet without bumping into some kind of sustenance. She walks past the snack station, and she walks past the nearest cafeteria, and then she walks past the cafeteria after that one. She walks past the gym and the stationary fitness pools. She walks past the pool tables and the Ping-Pong tables and the massage tables. She walks past the napping pods. She walks past the arcade room and the bowling alley and the mini-golf course. There's a cheer somewhere, as another team meets another milestone.

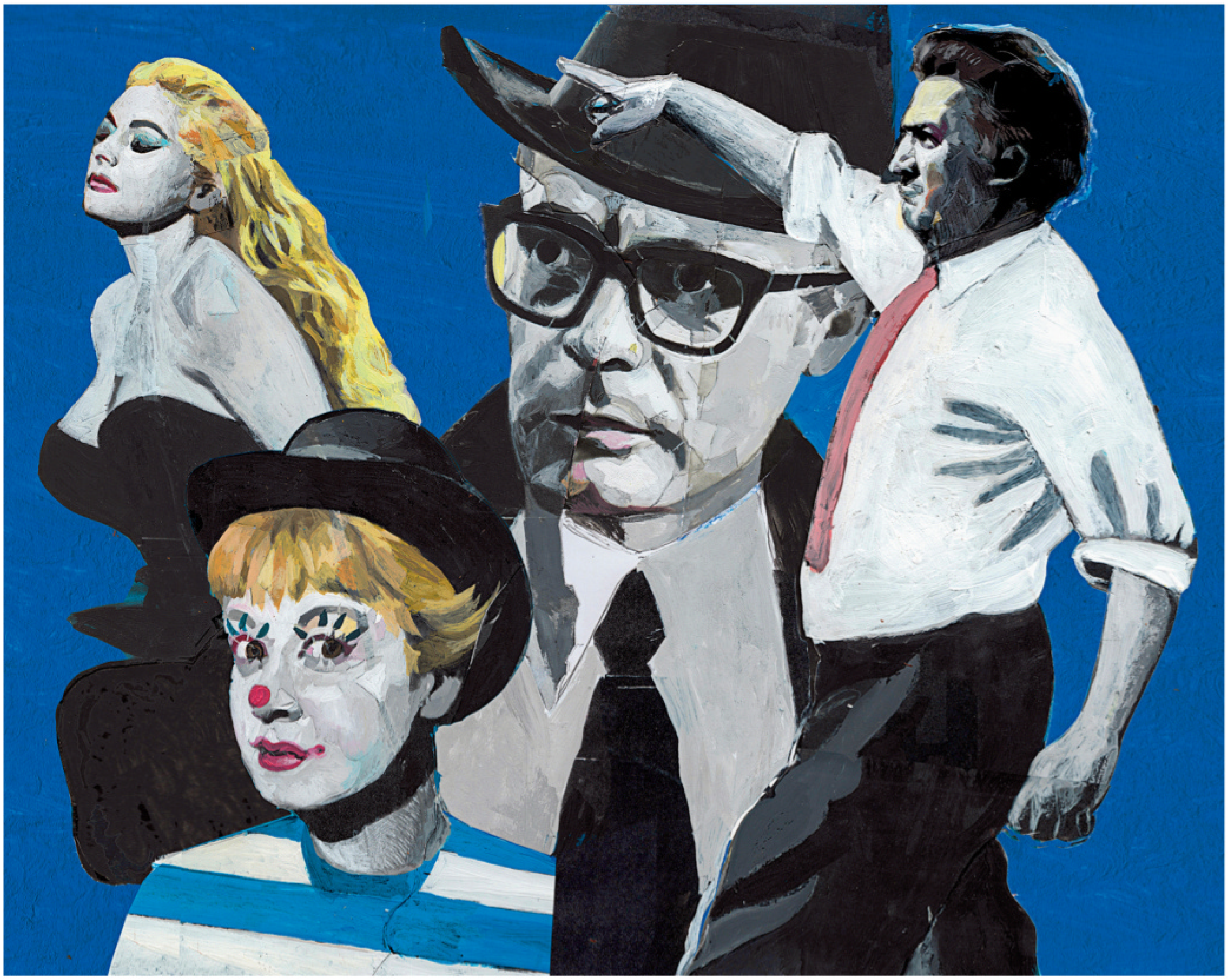
She walks out of the world's most popular search engine, but before that she steals a garbage bag from a cafeteria and fills it with free food from that cafeteria and a few of the others, as well as with Tupperwared leftovers, such as someone's masala curry, from the refrigerators. The woman needs something nice to happen; the universe owes it to her, a small thing she can lock up within the secret, innermost depths of herself so she has the strength to keep on screening the hate speech, the gore, the torture, the pornography both adult and child, the horrific traffic accidents, the executions carried out by terrorists. The woman is going to see the Mountain View mountain lion, the way mourners see a bird soaring in the air after a loved one's funeral and know that the loved one is at peace, that kind of poignant anecdote. On the deck at her sister's house, she lays out the food from the garbage bag—the curry, the candy bars, the bagels, the casseroles and pastas—and then, inside, opens that ginger ale and waits. She waits until the sun starts to set and it's dusk in the Bay.

A rustling in the bushes, then a limb and after that another limb steps out of the trees surrounding the back yard. A pubescent boy, one of the neighbor kids, comes ambling into the tableau. Is it the kid she almost ran over with her sister's diabolical electric car? The woman can't remember—these venture capitalists' kids all look alike. He inspects the food laid out like a buffet, lifts up a cheeseburger, sniffs it, tosses it, then he finds a bag of chips, opens it, and starts crunching. When he peers into the house, he notices her slumped against the wall opposite the sliding glass doors, observing him like he's the Mountain View mountain lion. That privileged prick smiles, unzips his jeans, pulls them down along with his boxers, aims his ass toward the sliding glass doors, and shits. He takes an enormous dump on the deck. Nature has heard her plea and has provided the spiritual communion she needed, though not the spiritual communion she wanted. It's a sign. No one will save her. Nothing is going to magically make it better. The woman has to figure out her life. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Mary South on content moderation and trauma.

THE CRITICS



As his career progressed, Federico Fellini gradually forsook actuality for the controllable studio universe of Cinecittà, in Rome.

PHOTOGRAPHS (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT): ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY; PHOTO 12 / ALAMY; TAZIO SECCHIAROLI / © DAVID SECCHIAROLI

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA VENTURA

THE CURRENT CINEMA

DREAM ON

The Fellini centennial.

BY ANTHONY LANE

A hundred years ago, on January 20, 1920, Federico Fellini was born in the Italian town of Rimini, on the Adriatic coast. The time and the place matter more than anything else, as we approach him now and try to make sense of the movies he bequeathed—crown jewels such as "La Dolce Vita" (1960) and "8 1/2" (1963), Oscar winners such as "La Strada" (1954), "Nights of Cabiria" (1957), and "Amarcord" (1973), and a cluster of other works. Many of them are warmed by the music of Nino Rota. Some glitter too fiercely for comfort.

Rimini has two faces. One face looks out to sea, and any Fellini fan will recall the beach scenes that litter his films. (The bullying hero of "La Strada," a circus strongman, winds up collapsing in tears on the sand. Exhausted orgiasts, in "La Dolce Vita," drift through pines and emerge onto a barren strand, where a monster of the deep, with viscid and accusing eyes, has been dragged ashore in a net.) Rimini's other face is turned inland, toward the Eternal—and maternal—City, which beckons Fellini's characters and gathers them to its bosom. The first word that we hear in "The White Sheik" (1952), his first film as a solo director, is "Roma." It is uttered by a man at a train window, nearing his destination. As Fellini explained to Lillian Ross, in 1965, in this magazine:

> My mother was a Roman. As soon as I came to Rome, I had the feeling that I was home. Now I consider Rome my private apartment. That is the seduction secret of Rome. It is not like being in a city, it is like being in an apartment. The streets are like corridors. Rome is still the mother.

We should also remember the notorious March on Rome, in 1922, two years after Fellini's birth. Fascists strode en masse toward the capital, and, shortly afterward, Mussolini came to power. So it was that Fellini grew up in the embrace of Fascist rule. "Amarcord," his most autobiographical film (which is saying something, for no director has fed more hungrily on the fruits of memory), is set in a heightened version of Rimini, staffed with figures in black uniforms. Fellini wastes no opportunity to find them absurd. As a Fascist commander, pool cue in hand, prepares to play a shot in the local bar, one of his minions tiptoes around the room, so as not to disturb the maestro at work. Suddenly, the lights go off. We could be in a theatre, watching a dark farce.

Foes of Fellini will point to a sequence like this and ask, Where are the victims? Do the sufferings of the time count for nothing, under his anesthetizing gaze? To be sure, the vision of Fascism that arises from "Amarcord" has none of the sinuous and oppressive mood that sheathes, say, Bertolucci's "The Conformist" (1970), and Fellini may be the least politically engaged of major filmmakers. He would shrug, I suspect, and say, "That's how it was"—like it or not, that's how the events of the period lodged in the soul of a boy. But "Amarcord" also discovers something adolescent in Fascism itself, with its taste for proud poses and its laughably doomed attempt to manhandle the vast profusion of experience into line with a single point of view. If Fellini's camera finds it hard to sit still, that is less a stylistic tic and more a principled refusal to get stuck.

No surprise, perhaps, that he began as a cartoonist, and continued to scribble sketches throughout his career. Whenever a soirée, in his movies, swells into a gallery of grotesques, you detect his primary insistence—shared with his friend Ingmar Bergman—on cinema as a record of the human visage. When Fellini went to Rome, in 1939, his mother wanted him to study law, but he never did. Instead he drew, and wrote garrulous humor pieces for newspapers. He had a regular column, "Will You Listen to What I Have to Say?" After the Allies liberated the city, he opened a store called the Funny Face Shop, where caricatures could be produced in ten minutes. Among the customers were American soldiers, who needed something to send home.

One day, in 1944, the movie director Roberto Rossellini came to the Funny Face. Having heard about Fellini, he invited him to participate in a new project. The result was that Fellini received writing credits on Rossellini's "Rome, Open City" (1945) and "Paisan" (1946), which happen to be two of the most wrenching testaments to the effects of war. (So much for his being numb to pain.) For each movie, Fellini—who had no college degree, and never went to film school—was nominated for an Academy Award. He started directing in the early nineteen-fifties, and didn't stop until "The Voice of the Moon" (1990), three years before his death. And *that's* how you get to be a great filmmaker. Simple, really.

Fellini is also the great divider. "La Dolce Vita" was the film most loved by Roger Ebert, for whom it was transformed with every viewing, whereas Pauline Kael likened Fellini's efforts to "poking your head into a sack of fertilizer and then becoming indignant because you're covered with excrement." The director, she said, was "shocked and horrified" by the antics of the idle rich that he surveyed. If so, the shock has not survived; what lingers, after sixty years, is a lazy amusement at mortal foibles, which are scarcely confined to the wealthy. It is the poor who flock to a strip of wasteland where a couple of kids, for a giggle, claim to have beheld the Virgin Mary. Any hint of holiness is wrecked by a rainstorm, and by the glare of the arc lights under which TV cameras hope to catch the miracle, yet Fellini does not rage at our credulity. He smiles.

The Catholic Church, meanwhile, *was* horrified at "La Dolce Vita." How else to respond to a film that begins with a skyborne statue of Jesus being ferried over Rome—a second coming, brought to us by helicopter? (Notice not just the sacred cargo but, beneath it, the half-built apartment blocks: a postwar metropolis, captured in mid-boom.) Then, there's the movie idol (Anita Ekberg), who dresses like a parody of a priest to ascend into the dome of St. Peter's, and famously romps in the Trevi Fountain. A monument of pagan majesty, in her strapless gown, she is an alabaster bust endowed with the breath of life; more blasphemous still, she drips water onto the head of her devotee, a hangdog reporter named Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni). No infant could be more tenderly baptized.

Mastroianni is one of two performers who lend a nourishing continuity to Fellini's films. The other is Giulietta Masina, to whom Fellini was married for fifty years. Her roles included a trumpet-tooting waif in "La Strada," a prostitute in "Nights of Cabiria," and a housewife visited by fantasies in Fellini's first color feature, "Juliet of the Spirits" (1965). The joke, with Masina, is that she couldn't be further from the voluptuaries who stalk through her husband's tales; with Mastroianni, the joke is that, though forever cast as a seducer, he is visibly hesitant and shy, halfhearted and half-cocked, as if embarrassed by the sway of his own lusts. Never does he appear more naked than when removing his spectacles.

If anything is to mute the centennial celebrations for Fellini, it will be his attitude toward the opposite sex. He was certainly more gynophobe than misogynist, not that so fine a distinction will carry much weight today. Think of Mastroianni, as the film director rendered unable to direct, in "8 1/2," and heckled by a parade of his past loves; or, again, as the limp Lothario in "City of Women" (1980), who strives and fails to make out with a fur-hatted passenger in the toilet of a train. Later, amid a throng of her fellow-feminists, she upbraids him as "this dismal, hollow, worn-out sultan," declaring, "We women are simply an excuse for him to perform, once again, his bestial fables, his circus, his neurotic show."

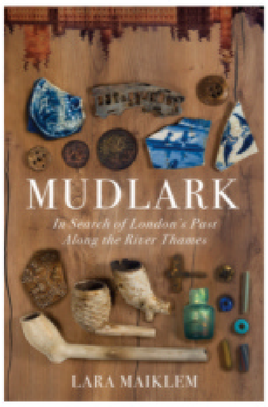
What's going on here? Is Fellini paying lip service to a new moral dispensation that he doesn't understand, or honestly chiding himself for former sins? Either way, the film is an ugly display, and I prefer the poise of "Fellini's Casanova” (1976), in which the dying hero of the title, played by Donald Sutherland, ends up peering back, with red-rimmed eyes, at his youthful self, waltzing on a frozen Venetian canal. His partner is not a willing paramour but an animated doll. Her features, though colored like flesh, are as polished as porcelain. History’s leading lover is consoled in the arms of a machine.

The true Venice, needless to say, had no part in the scene. By the time of “Casanova,” Fellini had more or less forsaken actuality, with its risks and smuts, for the controllable universe of the studio—specifically, for the cavernous soundstages of Cinecittà, in Rome. (It was opened, in 1937, by Mussolini.) There, for “Amarcord,” he re-created Rimini, swaths of the original having been flattened by wartime bombs. For “Roma” (1972), he built half a kilometre of highway, four lanes wide, with billboards and rest stops, ignoring or defying the fact that, if he wanted real roads, he had only to step outside. “And the Ship Sails On” (1983) took place on an ocean liner, which never left the safe haven of Cinecittà, and, for “The Voice of the Moon,” Fellini said, “I felt it was necessary to build an entire country,” complete with “a piazza, a church, a discothèque, a town hall, a shopping mall.” He had attained the status of a creator, summoning small worlds to comply with his imaginings. As he once remarked, “God may not play dice, but he enjoys a good round of Trivial Pursuit every now and again.”

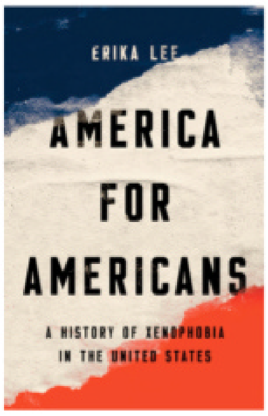
No wonder these late movies feel so hermetic. We may be charmed and dazzled, but often we can’t breathe. That is why, if I had to introduce a novice to Fellini, I’d suggest a big-screen showing of “I Vitelloni” (1953)—an early film, breezy and inconsequential, about a bunch of aimless pals in a Rimini-like town. Somehow, the younger Fellini strikes me as sadder and wiser than the all-powerful magus he would eventually become. (Maybe Ariel knows more than Prospero ever will.) The movie is sparsely plotted and blessed with fresh air; a typical day finds the *vitelloni* down at the misty beach, in coats and scarves, staring out to sea, like castaways hoping for a ship. And the ship, of course, sails on. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

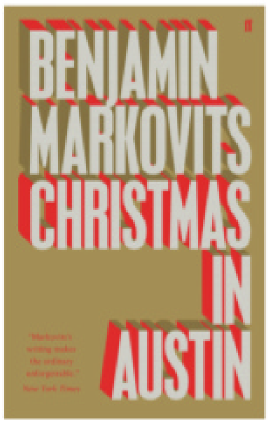
BRIEFLY NOTED



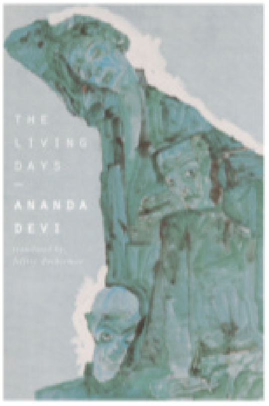
Mudlark, *by Lara Maiklem (Norton).* From high tide to low, the level of the Thames near London Bridge drops seven feet, revealing a foreshore that yields an unusual bounty: objects from across the centuries, preserved in the mud. This engrossing memoir evokes the subculture of the “mudlarks,” who scour the banks for fragments of London’s past. Their discoveries serve as entry points into the history of the river and its environs: scenes from long ago emerge from Roman castration clamps, medieval brooches, and sixteenth-century ivory sundials. A chapter on the synthetic clothes, plastic bags, and polystyrene of the modern era proves a sobering conservationist coda. Maiklem elegantly juxtaposes the fragile “wood, straw, reeds, leather and bone our ancestors left behind” with the “permanence of the things we throw away today.”



America for Americans, *by Erika Lee (Basic).* This sweeping account draws parallels between Benjamin Franklin’s worry over “swarthy” Germans “herding together” in the eighteenth century and Donald Trump’s race-baiting today. Xenophobia, Lee argues, has been an indelible “American tradition,” deployed to social and political ends since the country’s founding. A manifesto as much as a history, the book shows how every large immigrant group since Franklin’s time—Irish, Chinese, Italian, Mexican, Middle Eastern—was “scripted” by populist demagogues as alien and threatening. Allowing “a vocal and mobilized minority to dictate policy for the majority,” she writes, risks unmaking the country that immigrants helped create.



Christmas in Austin, *by Benjamin Markovits (Faber).* In this sequel to “Weekend in New York,” the close-knit Essinger siblings—Paul, Susie, Jean, and Nathan—revisit their childhood home, in Austin. With narration that deftly shifts from one family member to another, Markovits weaves together the drama of three generations: the siblings navigate the professional and romantic frustrations of adulthood; their parents must come to terms with the lives their children have fashioned; and the siblings’ own children begin to encounter moral dilemmas. The product is a loving and nuanced portrait of a family’s myriad functions: “information-producing machine . . . decision-requiring machine . . . argument-creating machine . . . catering company and cleaning service . . . childcare and school.”



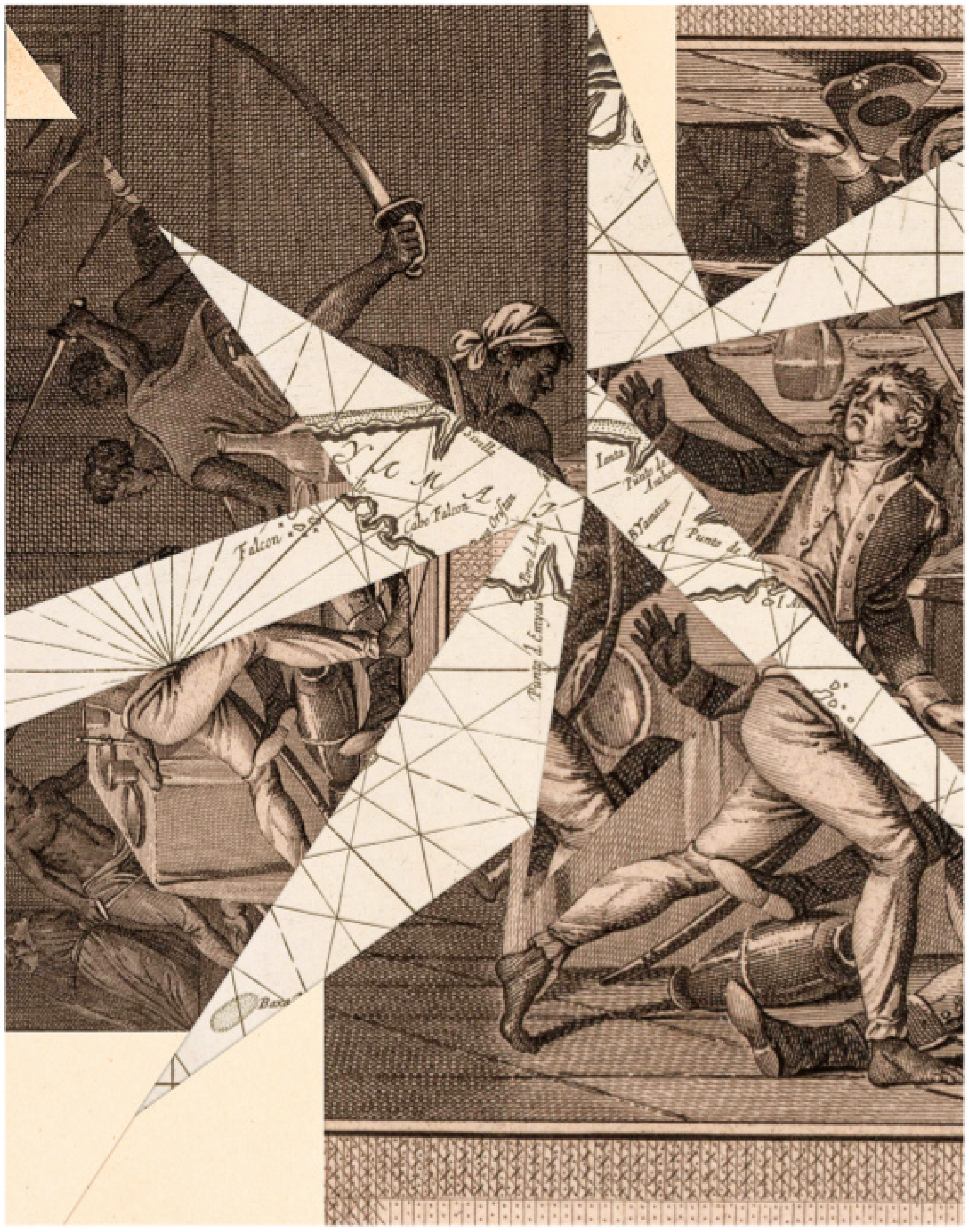
The Living Days, *by Ananda Devi, translated from the French by Jeffrey Zuckerman (Feminist Press).* This unsettling novel follows the doomed relationship between Mary, a white Londoner in her seventies, and Cub, a thirteen-year-old boy of Jamaican heritage. Mary, alone in a decaying house in Notting Hill, suffers from arthritis and incipient dementia. After a chance encounter with Cub, she takes him into her home and her bed. She is rejuvenated, but Cub is wary and his family, already affected by the city’s gentrification, is alarmed. Devi is alert to the ways in which social forces, such as racism and ageism, are reshaping London’s already complex post-colonial landscape, and her fluid, poetic language memorably conjures a union of two outcasts.

BOOKS

A LONG WAR

Revisiting the slave rebellions of Jamaica.

BY CASEY CEP



"Here's to the next insurrection of the negroes in the West Indies," Samuel Johnson once toasted at an Oxford dinner party, or so James Boswell claims. The veracity of Boswell's biography—including its representation of Johnson's position on slavery—has long been contested. In the course of more than a thousand pages, little mention is made of Johnson's long-term servant, Francis Barber, who came into the writer's house as a child after being taken to London from the Jamaican sugar plantation where he was born into slavery. Some of the surviving pages of Johnson's notes for his famous dictionary have Barber's handwriting on the back; there are scraps on which a twelve-year-old Barber practiced his own name while learning to write. Thirty years later, Johnson died and left Barber a sizable inheritance. But Boswell repeatedly minimizes Johnson's abiding opposition to slavery—even that startling toast is characterized as an attempt to offend Johnson's "grave" dinner companions rather than as genuine support for the enslaved. Boswell was in favor of slavery, and James Basker, a literary historian at Barnard College, has suggested that this stance tainted his depiction of Johnson's abolitionism, especially since Boswell's book appeared around the time that the British Parliament was voting on whether to end England's participation in the international slave trade.

Tacky's Revolt, waged in April, 1760, looks, in retrospect, like a prologue.

Johnson's abolitionist views were likely influenced by Barber's experience of enslavement. For much of the eighteenth century, Jamaica was the most profitable British colony and the largest importer of enslaved Africans, and Johnson once described it as "a place of great wealth and dreadful wickedness, a den of tyrants, and a dungeon of slaves." He wasn't the only Englishman paying close attention to rebellion in the Caribbean: abolitionists and slavers alike read the papers anxiously for news of slave revolts, taking stock of where the rebels came from, how adroitly they planned their attacks, how quickly revolts were suppressed, and how soon they broke out again.

In a new book, the historian Vincent Brown argues that these rebellions did more to end the slave trade than any actions taken by white abolitionists like Johnson. "Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War" (Belknap) focusses on one of the largest slave uprisings of the eighteenth century, when a thousand enslaved men and women in Jamaica, led by a man named Tacky, rebelled, causing tens of thousands of pounds of property damage, leaving sixty whites dead, and leading to the deaths of five hundred of those who had participated or were accused of having done so. Brown's most interesting claim is that Tacky and his comrades were not undertaking a discrete act of rebellion but, rather, fighting one of many battles in a long war between slavers and the enslaved. Both the philosopher John Locke and the self-emancipated Igbo writer Olaudah Equiano defined slavery as a state of war, but Brown goes further, describing the transatlantic slave trade as "a borderless slave war: war to enslave, war to expand slavery, and war against slaves, answered on the side of the enslaved by war against slaveholders, and also war among slaves themselves."

Understood as a military struggle, slavery was a conflict staggering in its scale, even just in the Caribbean. Beginning in the seventeenth century, European traders prowled Africa's Gold Coast looking to exchange guns, textiles, or even a bottle of brandy for able bodies; by the middle of the eighteenth

PHOTOGRAPH: FINE ART IMAGES / HERITAGE IMAGES / GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN GALL

century, slaves constituted ninety per cent of Europe's trade with Africa. Of the more than ten million Africans who survived the journey across the Atlantic, six hundred thousand went to work in Jamaica, an island roughly the size of Connecticut. By contrast, four hundred thousand were sent to all of North America. (The domestic slave trade was another matter: by the time the Civil War began, there were roughly four million enslaved people living in the United States.)

Jamaica had hundreds of plantations, which grew cocoa, coffee, ginger, indigo, and, above all, sugar. Half the enslaved population labored on sugar plantations, where even a modest operation had a hundred and fifty slaves who worked year-round, planting, harvesting, and refining the crop, which was sold around the world. Brown's previous book, "The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery," described the miserable conditions that prevailed in Jamaica after the British seized control from the Spanish, in 1655. Mortality rates were exceptionally high for both Europeans and Africans, not only because of tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever but also because of poor nutrition and oppressive working conditions. On some sugar plantations, there were twice as many deaths as births; the average slave could expect to survive only seven years of forced labor.

An Anglican missionary observed that the first toy given to white children in Jamaica was often a whip; the overseer Thomas Thistlewood, who managed forty-two slaves in St. Elizabeth Parish, kept a horrifying diary that describes how, in a single year, he whipped three-quarters of the men and raped half the women. When he moved to a different plantation, he threatened to dismember the enslaved men and women under his care, devising tortures and humiliations that included forcing some to defecate into other slaves' mouths and urinate in others' eyes, rubbing lime juice in their wounds after floggings, and covering a whipped, bound man in molasses while leaving him for the flies and mosquitoes. Alongside the daily temperature and rainfall, Thistlewood recorded the equally appalling behavior of his slaveowning neighbors. Those were scarce, however, since, by 1760, fewer than one in ten Jamaicans was white. There were so many Africans in Jamaica that the colonial government passed a law requiring plantation owners to have at least one white man for every twenty slaves on an estate. Most planters couldn't comply, and the ratio was revised to one for every thirty.

The British had already learned how vulnerable white colonists were in Jamaica. Since their expulsion of the Spanish, they had been engaged in intermittent conflict with the Maroons, a population of former Spanish slaves who had fled into the Blue Mountains, in the island's interior. Their name derived from the Spanish word for "wild," and they had been imported from Africa to replace the indigenous people, the Arawaks, nearly all of whom had been killed by the Spanish. The Maroons had periodically raided British plantations, stolen supplies, and seized farmland. When the attacks escalated, in what became known as the First Maroon War, the island's militia began retaliating, and it took more than ten years to reach a peace, in 1739. The British government agreed to recognize Maroon sovereignty in designated areas; the Maroons agreed to capture and return any runaway British slaves. There were other free blacks in Jamaica, too, including women who had been freed in the wills of white colonists who had kept them as concubines, and children who were the products of such unions.

The social hierarchies of the colony were complicated, and would only become more so. Just as many of the colonists who arrived in Jamaica were veterans of the British Army or the Royal Navy, many of the enslaved there had participated in armed conflicts before being forced into bondage. African states engaged in regional warfare long before European interference, and, after the transatlantic trade incentivized the kidnapping of enemies, the kingdoms of Akwamu, Akyem, Asante, Dahomey, Denkyira, and Oyo went to war with one another over territory, minerals, and people. Slaves from certain regions became more highly valued than others, including, for a time, the so-called Coromantee, who came from many different kingdoms on the Gold Coast.

Named for the town of Kormantse, in present-day Ghana, the Coromantee were at first prized by planters for their strength and work ethic. One colonial historian wrote that the Coromantee were "hardy, laborious, and manageable under mild and just treatment," but warned that they were "fierce, violent, and revengeful under injury and provocation." The name was more stereotype than anything: many of the people to whom it was applied had little in common except language, and not always that. It soon became the preferred pejorative for any rebellious slave, as if geographic origin were the only possible explanation for why someone would resist enslavement. Eventually, the Coromantee became so feared that colonists in Jamaica actually proposed banning their importation. They were said to have been the leaders of rebellions not only there but in Cartagena de Indias, Suriname, St. Croix, St. John, Antigua, and New York.

Perhaps no one fantasized about slave rebellions more than the whites who benefitted from the subjugation of slaves. Some of those fantasies were driven by fear, but some of them, strangely, stemmed from a romanticized notion of the figure of the rebellious slave. That notion achieved one of its most enduring forms in "Oroonoko," a 1688 novel by Aphra Behn, about the enslavement of a Coromantee nobleman. Tricked into slavery by the villainous captain of a slave ship, the heroic prince Oroonoko is taken from his African homeland to a West Indian colony, where he stages an unsuccessful revolt, after which he is tortured and executed. "Oroonoko" was adapted into one of the most popular plays of the Restoration era, and its renown endured well into the eighteenth century. The grandson of a king, Oroonoko represented an archetype: the royal whose servitude is a mistake, and whose rebellion is justified because he was wrongly enslaved, not because slavery is wrong. It took decades for audiences to start seeing the play and its source text from an abolitionist perspective, but by the time Samuel Johnson wrote about "Oroonoko," at the end of 1759, the version being staged featured two additional antislavery scenes.

Around the same time, a Coromantee named Tacky, from the Frontier plantation, in St. Mary Parish, was sneaking

"And in case we get tired of football, I brought Scrabble."

• •

away to a coastal cave with a few other slaves to plan their own rebellion. Sometimes spelled Takyi, the name means "royalty": Tacky was said to have been the chief of his village in West Africa, where he sold Gold Coast rivals into slavery and learned English from the traders who came to buy his prisoners of war. Eventually, he met the same fate, when a warring tribe defeated his; sent to Jamaica, Tacky brought his military knowledge with him. He and a hundred co-conspirators rallied on Easter Monday in 1760. Just after midnight, they attacked Fort Haldane, where a single sentinel guarded all of Port Maria Harbor. They murdered the watchman and made off with four barrels of gunpowder, a keg of musket balls, and forty guns, then used those supplies to make their way southward, raiding estates and burning whatever plantation land they could, disrupting the agricultural economy and, more crucially, recruiting comrades.

By first light, Tacky had attracted hundreds of slaves to his cause, including a significant number of women. Together, they moved onto Ballard's Valley Estate, a sugar plantation, and surrounded the overseer's house. The owner of one of the plantations they had already raided happened to be staying there; when he woke to news of the revolt, he went to see the attackers and was startled by a war cry. "Boys, don't you know me?" he called out to some of the rebels he recognized, thinking they might lay down their arms. They did know him, and they tried to kill him.

That night, though Tacky's army had no way of knowing it, the insurrection was at its height. They had killed dozens of whites, and they celebrated by roasting an ox and drinking stolen rum and Madeira wine. Obeah men, the spiritual leaders of the Coromantee, who carried out religious ceremonies not unlike those of Santería and vodou, had encouraged the rebels, and now administered oaths to new recruits, drawing blood from every rebel, mixing it with gunpowder and grave dirt, and distributing the mixture to each to drink, promising that it would protect them. Tacky himself was said to have been given the power to capture bullets in his hands and, like the Obeah men, was supposed to be safe from harm by any white man. These religious practices emboldened the rebels and terrified the whites, who later insisted that Tacky's troops not only murdered servants in their sleep at Ballard's Valley but drank the blood of those they killed.

The next day, the colony's lieutenant governor declared martial law and dispatched sixty soldiers to suppress the rebellion, which had splintered into gangs, some moving along the roads, others retreating into the forests. The colonists managed to capture and hang an Obeah man, apparently the chief oracle, demonstrating that no amount of enchantment could spare a Coromantee the wrath of the whites. After his death, the rebels had a more difficult time recruiting reinforcements, and many of the participants deserted. By contrast, the British, as soon as they alerted the Maroons, had more men for their cause, and ones who could draw on decades of experience tracking and hunting in Jamaica's interior.

Within a week, the Maroons had flushed Tacky and what remained of his insurgency out of the woods and toward the coast. A Maroon sharpshooter killed Tacky, and some of his followers took their own lives rather than surrender. As evidence of their victory, the Maroons cut off seventeen pairs of ears and decapitated Tacky so that his head could be paraded along the roads of the parish, then placed on a pike in Spanish Town.

But the end of Tacky was not the end of Tacky's Revolt. Brown argues that the conflict might more accurately be called the Coromantee War, since it was followed by more than a year of rebellions. Whether these were triggered by or organized in tandem with Tacky's uprising is a matter of dispute. Some claim that Tacky had been part of an island-wide revolt planned for Pentecost, but, after drinking too much one night, he mistakenly launched the attack weeks early. Others have argued that word of Tacky's actions inspired people to take up arms on their own plantations. Whether coördinated or concomitant, what Tacky did in April, 1760, looks, in retrospect, like a prologue.

Around the same time, a woman named Cubah, who called herself the Queen of Kingston, planned an insurrection with the aim of ruling the colony. At the end of May, a few hundred slaves in Westmoreland, led by a Coromantee named Wager, began an uprising that lasted nearly a year. In August, a slave named Simon marched twenty or so rebels from Hanover toward St. Elizabeth Parish. Meanwhile, dozens of other slaves whose names were never recorded rose up on their plantations, in small groups that never escaped, or, if they did, didn't make it very far—

seemingly isolated episodes of violence that, taken together, looked like a war raging all over Jamaica.

"The whole Island remained in great Terror and Consternation for some time," a British squadron commander observed. Like guerrilla warriors elsewhere, the enslaved Jamaicans often attacked and then dispersed, frustrating the militia's attempts to track them and harassing estates near the edges of the forest by stealing supplies or damaging property. The colonists, meanwhile, burned their crops to try to starve the rebels out of the woods and struggled to supply enough troops to pursue so many separate insurrections, a problem that grew worse as the conflict dragged on and members of the militia deserted.

Every few weeks, until October, 1761, rebellious prisoners were killed or were captured, tried, and executed—sometimes burned alive, sometimes hanged or gibbeted. Five hundred Africans died during the Coromantee War, and another five hundred were shipped to other colonies, to discourage rebellion—a questionable strategy, since they carried knowledge of the insurrection wherever they went. Brown dutifully records every troop movement, skirmish, and counterattack. The details can feel tedious, but the cumulative effect is to transform scattered and largely forgotten episodes into a history of war among slaves, planters, Maroons, and British soldiers.

After Tacky's uprising, the Jamaican government tried to ban the importation of Coromantees, then settled for separating them from one another on different plantations and expelling the more rebellious ones. The government also passed laws criminalizing the open practice of Obeah, forbidding slaves from possessing guns, and preventing blacks from gathering. Since most of the enslaved never had these freedoms to begin with, the new laws disproportionately affected free blacks, whose movements were newly regulated and who were forced by legislators to wear blue crosses on their right shoulders.

Such Draconian measures did little to stop slave revolts in Jamaica or elsewhere, but the revolts did change the debate over slavery. Within a few weeks of Tacky's attack on Fort Haldane, British newspapers were reporting "some Disturbances among the Negroes," and by the end of the summer the various uprisings were said to be "of bad Consequence to the whole island." But most of what we know about Tacky's Revolt does not come from newspaper bulletins—it comes from the writings of Jamaicans who witnessed it: Thistlewood, the brutal overseer, whose diary runs to fourteen thousand pages and includes daily reports on the rebels; the lawyer and planter Edward Long, who wrote a three-volume history of Jamaica that was published in 1774; and Bryan Edwards, who produced a two-volume history of the West Indies that was published in 1793. These men were all white, and, to varying degrees, they all advanced arguments rather than simply recording events.

Edwards, writing three decades later, during the Haitian Revolution, romanticized Tacky, depicting him as an Oroonoko-like figure—a royal slave whose rebellion was justified by his circumstances and whose comrades were stoic and courageous, the archetype of the noble savage. Edwards saw Tacky as a martyr, not to the cause of abolition but to the romantic spirit of the Coromantee, who could be tamed as long as they were treated fairly. Although abolitionists like Samuel Johnson argued that every uprising was an appropriate response to slavery's inherent brutality, Edwards represented a strand of thought that dismissed rebelliousness, including Tacky's Revolt, as a rare reaction to aberrant treatment: one master's overly harsh punishments or another's refusal to let his slaves have an Easter holiday.

In reality, Tacky's actions probably reflected the plotting of a military leader looking to rule a slave society, not to end slavery. Considered in an Atlantic context and not an American one, his motivations had less to do with Enlightenment ideas of equality than with power. Similarly, the assistance that the Maroons gave the British reveals the complex political alliances that dictated behavior before the beginning of the Afro-Caribbean liberation movements. For Edwards and other planters, their political control of the Maroons provided an alternative model to abolition, letting them worry about the "Tackeys among us," that is, specific rebellious slaves, rather than the institution of slavery.

But Edward Long, who served with Edwards on the committee of the Jamaican legislature that investigated the Coromantee War, insisted that all Africans were Tacky, and that all Tackys were subhuman. In 1772, a British court ruled that, although chattel slavery was legal in the colonies, it was illegal in Britain itself. After that decision, Long devoted himself to his writings, which are full of virulent racism, and used his work, including "History of Jamaica," to attack the reasoning of abolitionists, defend the rights of planters, and warn that blacks were a "venomous and dangerous ulcer, that threatens to disperse its malignancy far and wide, until every family catches infections from it." He insisted that rebellions were caused not by the slaves' mistreatment but simply by their nature: "brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious." His solution was to advocate for abolishing the slave trade but maintaining domestic slavery.

Long was wrong about this, and almost everything else. The revolt that ended slavery in Jamaica was led by Samuel Sharpe, a Creole born near Montego Bay who was ordained in the Baptist Church. A few days after Christmas in 1831, eighteen years after Long had died, Sharpe and what eventually numbered sixty thousand of the colony's enslaved population protested their condition. He and three hundred others were hanged. A parliamentary investigation into what became known as the Baptist War led to the abolition of slavery everywhere in the British Empire in 1834.

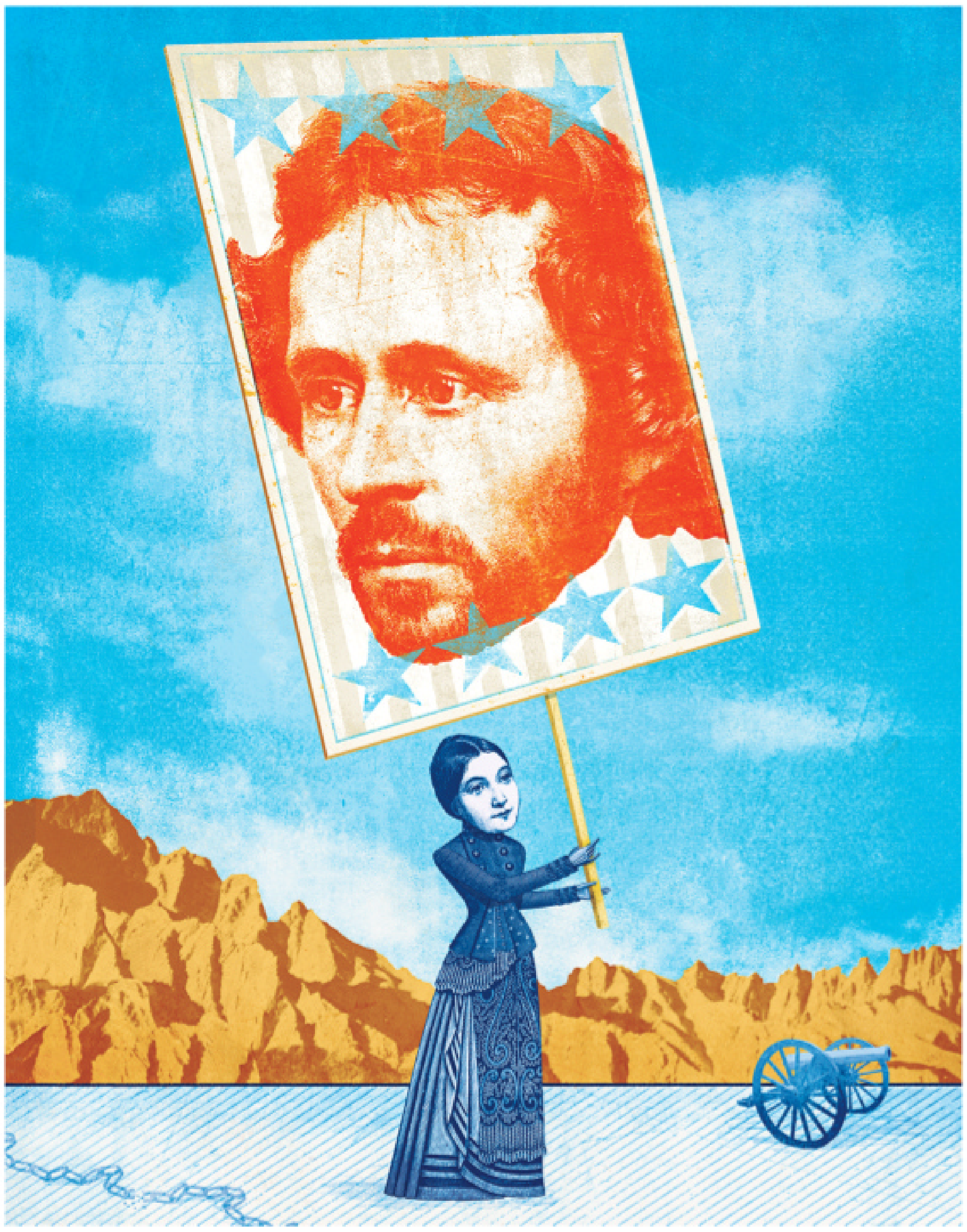
"Because slaveholders wrote the first draft of history," Vincent Brown laments, "subsequent historiography has strained to escape from their point of view." But "Tacky's Revolt" is a fine start, rescuing even minor acts of resistance from the contemporaneous accounts of men like Long, and making a coherent whole out of the diffuse, chaotic attempt to wage war on enslavers. The book is a sobering read for contemporary audiences in countries engaged in forever wars, reminding us how easily and arbitrarily the edges of empire, and its evils, can fade from or focus our vision. It is also a useful reminder that the distinction between victory and defeat, when it comes to insurgencies, is often fleeting: Tacky may have lost his battle, but the enslaved did eventually win the war. ♦

BOOKS

UNTRUE WEST

The very American adventures of Jessie and John Frémont.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



Legendary development can happen with astonishing speed after a life is past. Gore Vidal, in his 1992 novel, "Live from Golgotha," made sport of the notion of television coverage of the Crucifixion, as the kind of thing that would happen only in contemporary America, but in truth Jesus' body was hardly cold, or gone, before the apostle Paul, in a single generation, had made the desert rebbe into a demigod. The special American contribution to legend-making has not been speed so much as absolute simultaneity, with the life and the legend developing together. The American frontier, the Wild West, was not burnished and made epic in memory. It was made epic even as its very brief life was taking place. Buffalo Bill was only twenty-three when dime novels about him began to appear in New York, and early accounts of Billy the Kid's life read "like a press agent's yarn," as one biographer says, because they were. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were robbing banks and posing for mock formal photographs all at the same time. This national truth remains constant even in our own time. The Apollo missions were genuine acts of daring—and were also, as everyone knew at the time, scripted television programming, with well-wrought lines delivered live.

The couple cynically stage-managed their Western exploits for propaganda value.

This habit, of legend unfurling alongside history, has some oddly perverse effects. First, it can make an event itself dubious. If it was so obviously orchestrated and cynically exploited, might it not be real at all? And so we get the loony theories of a faked moon landing, just as Billy the Kid's killing is now said to have been faked as part of a conspiracy—and we get, too, the still hardy story that Butch and Sundance never really died in Bolivia and Butch came back and thrived out West. The habit can also delay our genuine perception of an event until after the mythical parts have faded. Apollo 11, a triumph of human audacity—think of going in a telephone booth to the moon under the guidance of a 1969 computer—was in its time dismissed by Norman Mailer as a dull example of Wasp engineering efficiency. We had to wait fifty years to get a movie saying, Yes, it really was a remarkable thing! Attempting to puff adventures, we can increase their immediacy and diminish their significance. Billy the Kid may have been a publicist's token, but he really did live, and Pat Garrett really did kill him dead.

One of the virtues of Steve Inskeep's new book, "Imperfect Union: How Jessie and John Frémont Mapped the West, Invented Celebrity, and Helped Cause the Civil War" (Penguin Press), is that it tracks this American phenomenon back to something like a satisfying starting point—the life of the Frémonts and their pursuit, in the eighteen-forties, of the Oregon Trail, the very first real American adventure that was cynically stage-managed for propaganda (and commercial) value. Even before the ubiquity of speed-of-light communication, which one might have thought essential, John Frémont's westward travel was rapidly shared, with Jessie helping to ghostwrite the exploits. It was almost as if he became famous for trekking the Oregon Trail before he ever made it to Oregon. "Celebrity" and "celebrity culture" are parts of modern life itself, and tracing them to a single source is silly—no celebrities could have been more popularly celebrated than the aristocrats of eighteenth-century French courts—but this particular American phenomenon, in which being a striver and be-

SOURCE: CHRONICLE / ALAMY (WOMAN); BETTMANN / GETTY (MAN)

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN NORTHEAST

coming a star flow together in one field of action, really does seem to get started here.

Inskeep's subtitle might be a bit showy, but the Frémonts turn out to be fine characters for a book, or a miniseries, for that matter. Pretty much the entire dramatic matter of America before the Civil War passes through their lives: the gold rush, the way west, the taking of California, the Donner Party, the growth of abolition, and the coming of the war. But it is their relation to publicity that seems most current. There were towns called Fremont and a street in newly minted San Francisco named for them while the couple were still trying to make their fortune with dubiously acquired property elsewhere in California. John Frémont emerges as one of those characters—like Aaron Burr or, in another way, Charles Lindbergh—who seemed born to end up with their face on currency but instead inspired only the names of streets whose origin the people who walk on them no longer know. An antislavery Republican candidate for President, Frémont also played a crucial role in what is in retrospect one of the most astonishing parts of the American story: the inclusion of California as part of the United States, and not as the separate, perhaps Spanish-speaking country—the North American Chile—that its geography and history would seem to dictate.

Inskeep, a reporter and NPR host, puts Jessie on equal footing with John, not just because of contemporary feminist tastes but also because his life really was dependent on hers. His marriage to her was hypergamous, with her lifting him up socially. A good-looking Army officer with a French background, he was twenty-eight when, in 1841, he eloped with Jessie, the pretty, super-bright, and ambitious seventeen-year-old daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, of Missouri. Accepting his new son-in-law, more or less grudgingly, as a fait accompli, Benton did a great deal to promote Frémont and the cult of celebrity that his life embodied. A onetime newspaperman, a ferocious self-publicist, and a resolute expansionist, Benton decided to send his son-in-law out West and to, Inskeep says, "make John C. Frémont the leading character in a news story."

Once Benton contrived, against objections from the military, for him to be sent toward the Oregon territory, the young Frémont dutifully borrowed a sextant and some surveying instruments from a friend, did some shopping in New York for adventuring equipment, and set out. Fitfully leading an expedition of some twenty men over what was for the most part previously trodden ground, he managed to get to South Pass and climb a nearby peak, which he decided was the highest in all the Rockies. He planted a flag there (a camera that he had bought in New York didn't work, the kind of detail that NASA would later get right in its expeditions) and came back East in time to lay the flag ostentatiously on the belly of his pregnant wife. The two of them soon got to work on a "Report on an Exploration," which brilliantly made much, rather than little, of Frémont's erratic and amateur leadership, complete with vomiting and headaches.

Inskeep gives Jessie much credit for the book, observing that its "apparent humility made the narrator seem honest and relatable, even as he was making the extraordinary claim of having climbed the highest point" in the mountain range. The account of the short trip made Frémont a national hero and helped inspire thousands of Americans to head west from Missouri. It later turned out that a hundred peaks in the Rockies were higher than the one that Frémont had climbed and claimed for wife, child, and country, but no matter. His countrymen continued to print the legend.

Frémont may have been a fraud, but he was not a phony: although he hadn't done anything like what his fellow-citizens believed he was doing, he sincerely wanted to be what he seemed to be. Instead of remaining in the East, he spent the rest of the decade returning west, leaving his wife in St. Louis and Washington D.C., where she raised their family and managed his reputation.

It was after 1845 that he engaged in his greatest exploit, one pitched in the usual register of slightly daffy, nearsighted happenstance. Headed to Oregon again without explicit orders to

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either assault or avoid California, he made an intrusion into the Mexican region called Alta California. The local officials asked him, peaceably enough, to respect their authority and leave. They made an effort to get him out, but he hung around.

Then a local Mormon settler named William Ide, who had been in California for less than a year, decided that the lives of the local Americans were being threatened. With the blessing of Frémont, who was camping nearby, Ide joined a party of Americans on a raid of the Sonoma residence of a Mexican general, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. The general, outnumbered, agreed to surrender, and offered the Americans some of the already promising local wine, which he had been among the first to produce. The Americans, one by one, got drunk, except for Ide, who was a Mormon. (Nondrinkers have a huge advantage in an alcohol-fuelled civilization.) Accepting the surrender, Ide declared California an independent republic. He then marched Vallejo and his men off to Frémont's encampment. A natural opportunist if not much of an imperial adventurer, Frémont decided to keep Vallejo captive and take credit for the liberation of California. "He had gone from a reluctant warrior to, in his mind, the keystone of the revolution," Inskeep explains.

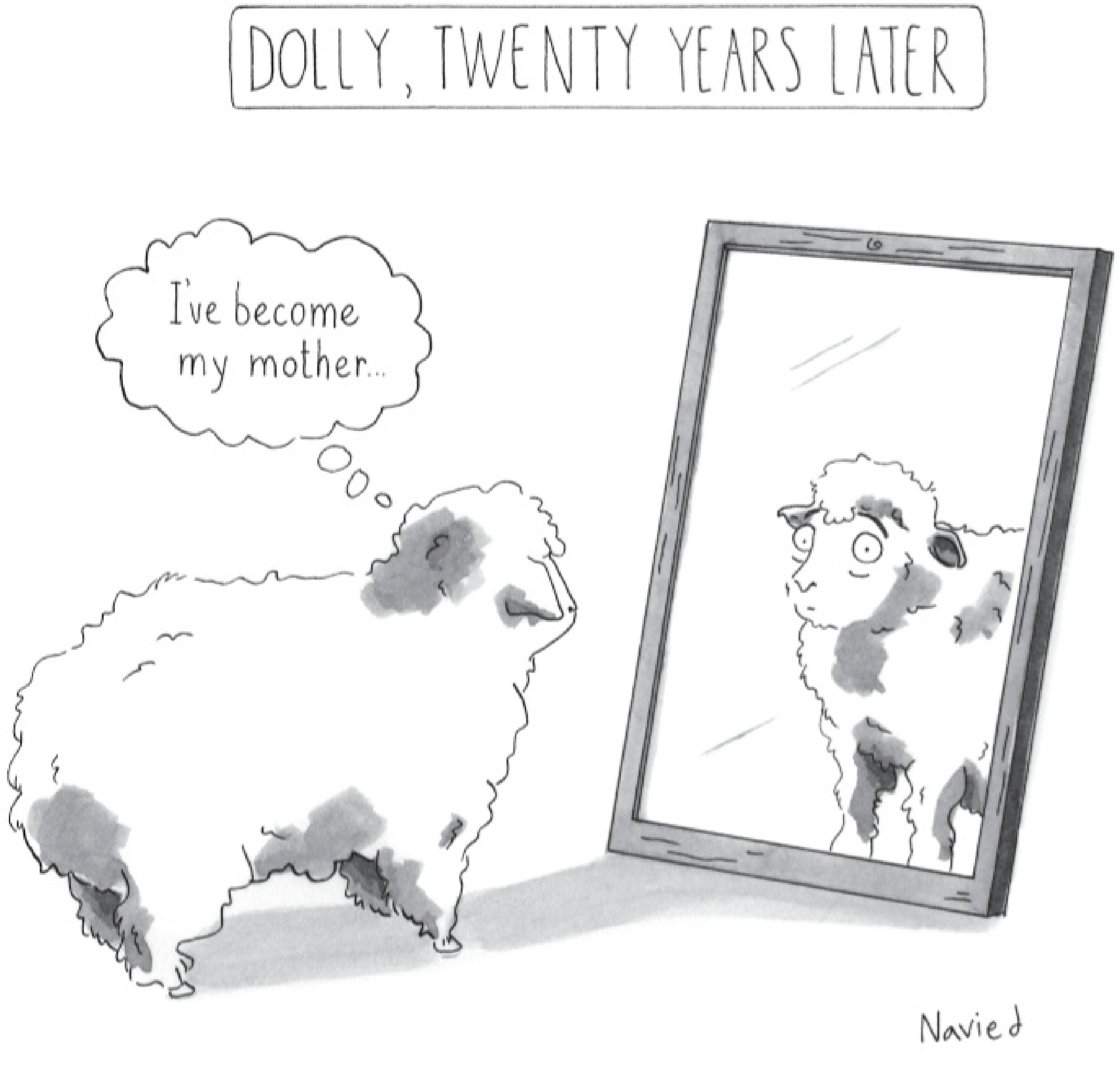
At this point, a nearby naval commodore, falsely assuming that Frémont must have acted on Presidential orders rather than on his own muddled improvisational initiative, sailed in with a small group of ships and seized California on behalf of the United States. Frémont's fate was ironic: having accepted the primacy of the Navy, he refused to take orders from the Army general who arrived later, and he was court-martialled on his return to D.C. Nothing at all was at stake in this confrontation; the fate of California was already fixed, and Frémont, however improbably, had already been assigned as its hero. Nonetheless, interservice rivalry, a force never to be underestimated, had to have its day. Frémont was found guilty—then was immediately pardoned and restored to rank by President James K. Polk. Towns across the country would soon be named for him.

Frémont then acted foolishly, as he would again and again throughout his life. Ignoring Kenny Rogers's later, appropriately fake-frontier wisdom, he didn't know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Instead of counting his winnings and leaving the table—the guilty verdict was as much pure newspaper fodder as his climbing the mountain had been, and he could simply have accepted victory when he was pardoned—he melodramatically resigned from the Army, insisting that his honor had been stained.

Having left the military, Frémont occupied that odd American ground of those who have done something once and are famous for having done it, without doing very much now. He speculated in California land and was, once again, a kind of innocent, bemused spectator to the coming of the gold rush, in 1849, more or less stumbling into a significant (though later much adjudicated) mineral holding near Yosemite. Then, as later military celebrities would do, he made a run for the White House.

Frémont secured the Republican Presidential nomination, in 1856, by a shrewd piece of political maneuvering, one that reminds us just how complex and contradictory the politics of abolition were: some of the Know-Nothings, fiercely anti-immigrant (and anti-Catholic), were also antislavery, it being possible at the time for white working-class Americans to hate Irish people as much as they hated black people. Frémont's political managers got him the nomination by building a coalition of anti-immigrant opponents of slavery and progressives who opposed slavery—aligning proto-Trumpists with proto-Sandersites.

In the campaign, Frémont was taken to be an abolitionist, which he really wasn't, and Jessie to be a feminist, which she wasn't really, either. Frémont was also falsely accused in the campaign of being a secret Catholic, and, as with Barack Obama's supposed Muslim boyhood, there was just enough complexity in his past to sell the charge. (John and Jessie had been married by a Catholic priest, but John's mother raised him Episcopalian.) Frémont, to his credit, thought it beneath his dignity to refute the claim, which, alas, gained further purchase as a result. Jessie played a crucial, rather Hillary Clinton-like role in the campaign. "Give 'em Jessie"—which Inskeep identifies as an



old-fashioned way of saying "Give 'em hell"—became a Frémont slogan, and one New York newspaper wrote, "The felicitous double entendre only needs to be published to become the watchword of the campaign, and . . . if the gallantry of the country demanded a Queen at the head of the nation, the lovely lady of the Republican nominee would command the universal suffrages of the people." Frémont badly lost the election, even in California, to James Buchanan, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, who dithered for another four years until the Republicans decided that they needed an antislavery ideologue, not an all-purpose hero, and nominated Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, in turn, briefly gave Frémont command of an army during the Civil War, but the badly miscast Frémont blew it, in part because of a well-meaning but premature emancipation proclamation he declared in Missouri. Jessie went to Washington to straighten Lincoln out, but Lincoln—a little uncharacteristically, but he may have felt worn out by the Frémonts' lobbying—called her, to her face, "quite a female politician." "I felt the sneering tone," she remarked afterward, fairly enough.

There is a lot of ruin in a nation, Adam Smith once said, meaning that it is born ruined—that any social system is rotten already, yet still keeps most people fed and placated. Those systems and practices can be dysfunctional while the whole still works, more or less. In the same way, there is always a lot of chaos in a hero—meaning not that all heroes are chaotic but that the elements of heroism flow back and forth uncertainly through a life. The great virtue of Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical is to see that Hamilton might have been Burr; Burr, Hamilton. Most men and women who rise above or venture outside the norm turn out to have a bewildering variety of gifts and defects, and they blunder as often as they pursue a fixed purpose. Looking back, Frémont seems mostly like a fascinating screwup—but he was less of one than Ulysses S. Grant was, right until the Mississippi River campaigns. Frémont was possessed not of "undaunted courage" but of intense ambition, the habit of perseverance in a cause, and the ability to rebound from disappointment. He also had something essential to what we call heroism: a kind of emotional efficiency that led him, from time to time, to drive his followers through the snow and into needless frostbite. At various moments, he might have become President or a truly successful military leader or even the actual, and not just fictive, father of California. But none of this quite happened, in part because of flaws in his nature—he got impatient or just confused when faced with a decisive moment—and in part simply because of chance.

The irony is that the Frémonts, pioneers of publicity as much as of the American frontier, are now largely forgotten, and in need of salvage operations like Inskeep's good one. (John, constantly on the hunt for a fortune, ended up dying in a New York boarding house in 1890, though Jessie, who lived on into the new century, stayed in California and became one of the living legends of the newly bustling city of Los Angeles.) Very much in the spirit of 2020, Inskeep asks, in his last chapter, whether the Frémonts made the country more equal; the question that his countrymen would have asked was whether he had made it greater. Their complicated sense of greatness turned on an idea of character and courage and helped explain why, having failed so often, Frémont was given so many more chances. His contemporaries had watched him cross the country, ocean to ocean, and, even if they knew it was a little bit fake, they also thought it was extremely cool.

Thomas Hart Benton, the superintending father-in-law, was, not entirely incidentally, the great-great-uncle of the regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, who was, in turn, the teacher and mentor of Jackson Pollock, who became something like the Frémont of American art, the man who scaled the highest Picasso peaks but did so in the pages of *Life*. The circuits of celebrity in America never really close. ♦

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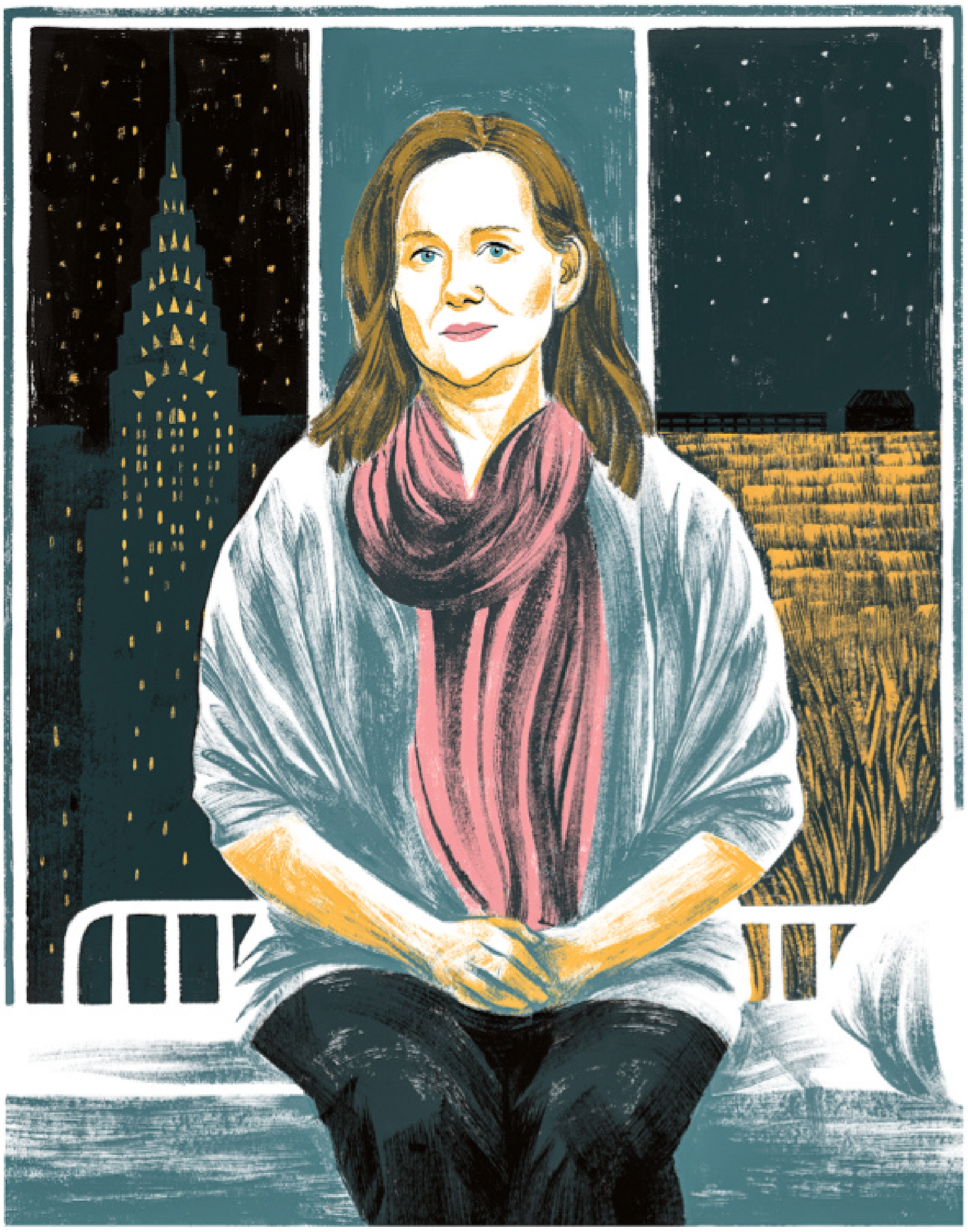
HOME TRUTHS

"My Name Is Lucy Barton" explores the legacy of family trauma.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



Laura Linney radiates warmth and lucidity in this one-woman production.

On the subject of his vocation, Philip Roth liked to quote Czeslaw Milosz: "When a writer is born into a family, that family is finished." It's a great aphorism, pithy and cavalier, as emphatic as a gunshot. To write is to declare a loyalty that runs deeper than blood, to make a pledge to the self and its expression; to write well is to tell the truth about what you have seen, starting with where—and who—you come from. That, anyway, is what Milosz, and Roth, felt, and they make the selfishness at the heart of a writer's life sound like the glorious liberation it is. But there's also a riskier exposure at stake. The writer who bares others' secrets must also bare her own, standing vulnerable before the people who purport to know her best. When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished, not just because the child is bound to tell the truth about her parents but because she must tell the truth about herself.

Elizabeth Strout's novel "My Name Is Lucy Barton" is the story of a writer reckoning with the legacy of a scarred family life and slowly coming to terms with the costs and the rewards of her art. When Lucy is in her early twenties and newly married, she moves with her husband to New York, where they live in the West Village. Lucy is from Amgash, Illinois, more of a pinprick on the map than a town proper, and she grew up poor, sharing a single room with her brother, her sister, and her parents, a seamstress and a repairman of farm machinery; there was no heat, no toilet, and never enough to eat. Lucy got good grades, though, and escaped to Chicago on a scholarship. And she began writing stories. Two have been published, but she is shy about saying so. A neighbor takes an interest in her and, when he learns what she does, advises her to be ruthless. Lucy is caught short. "I did not think I was or could be ruthless," she tells us. How she learns to become so is the subject of this quiet yet surprisingly fierce book.

"My Name Is Lucy Barton" was published in 2016 and quickly landed at the top of the *Times* best-seller list, bumping down "The Girl on the Train," a thriller about a scorned, alcoholic woman, and "All the Light We Cannot See," a historical heart-tugger about a blind one. Evidently, people also wanted to read about a more familiar sort of woman, a type almost too recognizable to warrant sustained attention—that is, one who suffers doubt but holds out hope for clarity, who applies herself imperfectly but insistently to the task of living.

Now they can see her, too, in the form of Laura Linney, who stars in a one-woman adaptation of Strout's novel (directed by Richard Eyre, at the Manhattan Theatre Club's Samuel J. Friedman). The set, designed by Bob Crowley, is minimal. A single hospital bed and a utilitarian, nondescript armchair occupy the stage. Behind the furniture are three nested screens, onto which are alternately projected the Chrysler Building—faintly shimmering by day, a bright beacon in the murky city sky by night—and the corn and soy fields of Lucy's childhood, explosively green, as if touched up with Hulk-colored food dye. (Luke Halls did the video design.) Linney, in tapered slacks and a long, loose cardigan, strides out, to inevitable applause—the audience sits onstage as well as in the house—and, as Lucy, speaks directly to us. Some years ago, she says, she came to the

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE CUSHMAN

hospital with a ruptured appendix and developed a mysterious and undiagnosed illness that kept her there for nine weeks. (This was in the mid-eighties, during the height of the AIDS epidemic; later, she will tell us of seeing a hospital door marked with a yellow sticker, a sign of plague within.) Her husband rarely came to see her, and, when her two young daughters visited, they were brought by a family friend. Lucy's only regular contact was with a kind doctor, who seemed to feel fatherly toward her, visiting her daily, beyond the normal call of duty.

Then, one day, she woke to find her mother sitting in the chair by her bed. It had been years since Lucy had seen her; she had never before come to New York. Lucy's mother—we don't learn her name—is an ambiguous presence, part comfort, part threat. She calls Lucy by her childhood pet name, Wizzle; Linney distinguishes her with a cragged, smoky voice, whose flattened "a"s and sanded "r"s supposedly signal northern Illinois. (This New Yorker's limited ear would have pegged her as a Bostonian.) She's withholding and Midwestern proud, but, when Lucy asks for stories of home, her mother obliges, telling tales of Amgash and its people, which she seasons with bitter humor and a dash of Schadenfreude. There's Kathie Nicely, for instance, a wealthy woman whose dresses Lucy's mother sewed, who ends up divorced by her husband, abandoned by her lover, and despised by her children, and Mississippi Mary, whose fate, on discovering her husband's infidelity, is just as bleak. What Lucy's mother doesn't like to talk about is the Bartons. How Lucy's father, who returned from the Second World War with post-traumatic stress disorder, flew into unstoppable panics and brutally humiliated Lucy's brother. How Lucy's mother herself beat the children. How Lucy, when she was very young, was locked in the family truck while her parents went to work, an ordeal that Lucy can't address with her mother, and instead describes to us:

> I cried until I could hardly breathe. Once in a while I see a child crying with the deepest of desperation, and I think it is one of the truest sounds a child can make. I have left the subway car I was riding in so I did not have to hear a child crying that way.

Strout's language, deftly adapted for the stage by Rona Munro, is simple in the way of a coiled pot or a Shaker chair, a solid, unfussy construction whose elegance lies in its polished unity, and Linney, radiating warmth and lucidity, is just the right actor to bring it to life. Winding through dense tracts of script, her ninety-minute performance is a feat of subtle bravura. It's no easy thing to play a mother in one breath and her child in another. (Ask Norman Bates.) As in Strout's novel, there is a possibility here that Lucy has fantasized her mother's visit, whether in the haze of her sickness or in the more productive intentional imaginings of a fiction writer; whatever the case, as Lucy goes deeper into her story, the older woman starts to fade, and Linney lets us see through Lucy's shyness to her open heart, which has sustained her through a life of loneliness and a staid and estranging marriage. Linney's skin seems nearly to shine, and tears roll down her cheeks, which she wipes with practical, smiling self-assurance.

Penguin Random House Audio, a producer of the play, is releasing an audiobook of the production, and that, in fact, may be the better way to experience it, because, despite Linney's sensitivity and finesse, something is missing onstage. There is a lulling quality to the play's narrative form, which, in the cozy darkness, can feel like a bedtime story (I couldn't help but notice some heads drooping), and there are too many of those Amgash anecdotes, with their parade of bit characters, which at first provide an opening into the drama of the Bartons but eventually distract us from it. The problem is partly structural: Eyre and Munro have leaned heavily on Lucy's childhood, all but erasing the novel's thread involving literary mentorship, and certain details, such as Lucy's enduring preoccupation with the Nazis (her father, stationed in Germany, killed two local boys at point-blank range; her husband's German father was a prisoner of war; and, with almost apologetic gratuitousness, Lucy notes that her angelic doctor is Jewish), fail to cohere. But there is a textural mundaneness, too. On Crowley's restricted stage, the physical action consists mainly of Linney pacing from chair to bed and back again, and Strout's canny elisions register too often as blanks. "All life amazes me," Lucy says, and Linney's face lights up beautifully as she says it. That is what this production could use: more life—an escape from the antiseptic cloister of the hospital room to the rousing world outside. ♦

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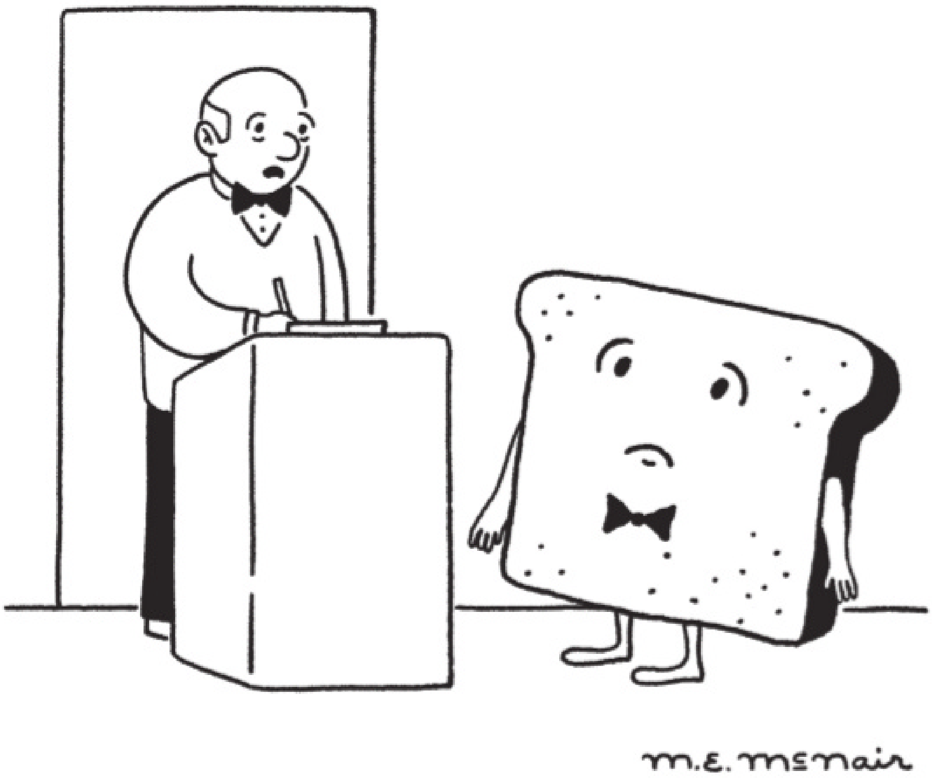
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Elisabeth McNair, must be received by Sunday, January 26th. The finalists in the January 13th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 10th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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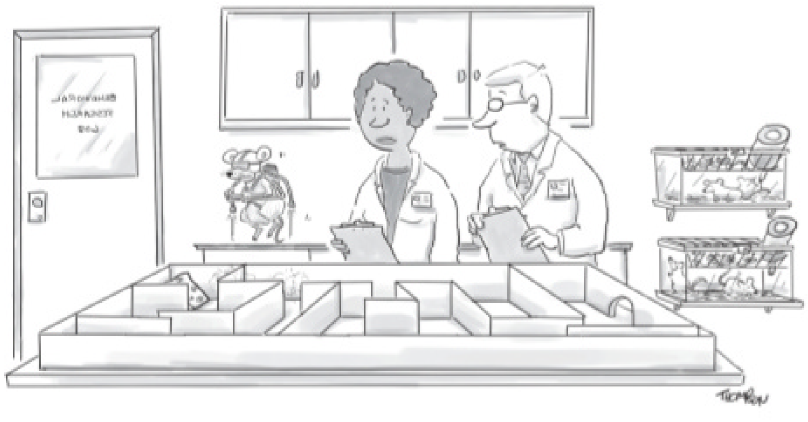
THE FINALISTS

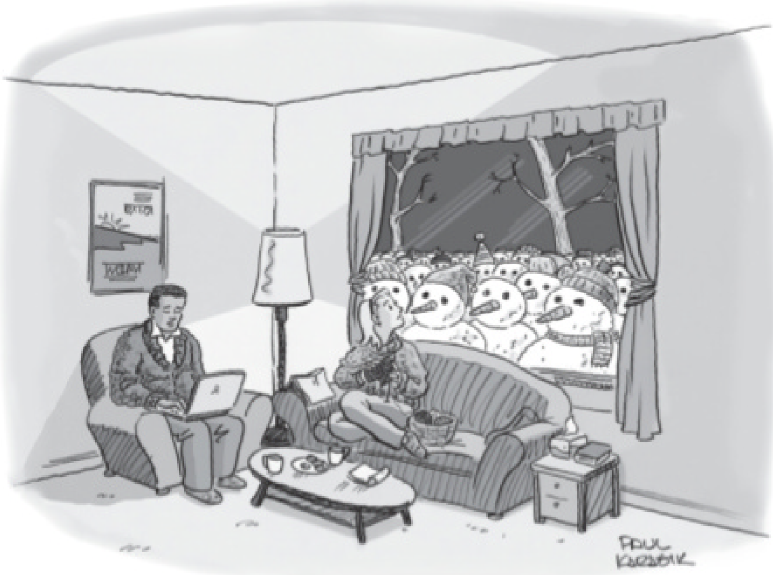


“Yes, that's cool. But it's not statistically significant.”
Raul Kottler, Oak View, Calif.

“Exhibits inability to understand maze exercise.”
Jess Fischer, Portland, Ore.

“Let's just give him the damn cheese.”
Michael Lomazow, Riverside, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Great, now they all want a scarf.”
Siddharta Reddy, Philadelphia, Pa.

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